

Letters to  
My Son



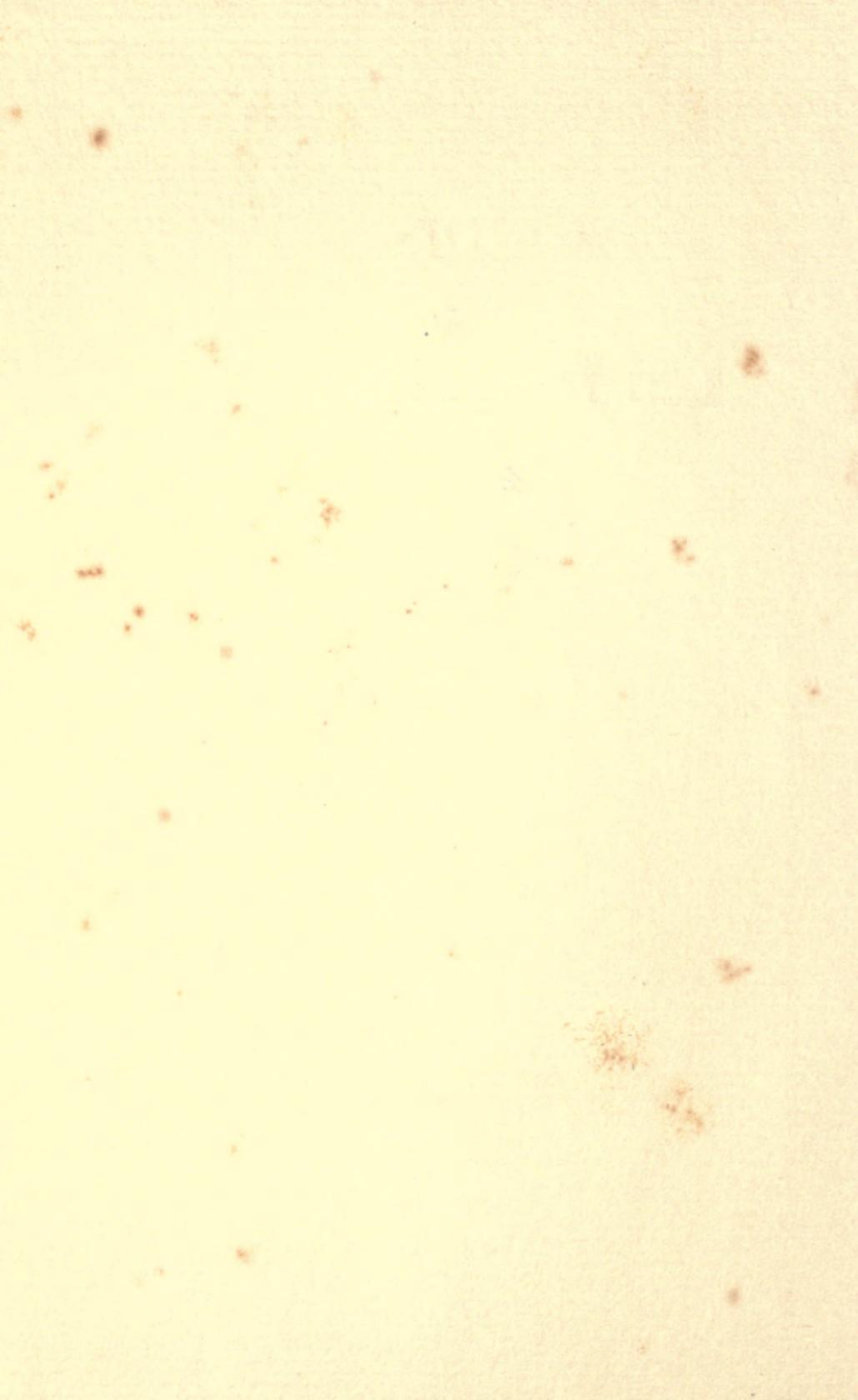
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# Letters to My Son



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to  
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## Preface

**L**ITTLE son, these letters are for you, so that if I should not live to see you grow up, if I should have to leave you before ever your eyes could look at me, or your voice cry to me, you should know how much I had loved you and longed for you, and you would be able to come to them for the comfort I would have given to you if I had lived.

And you *will* come to them, won't you, just as you would to me? And they shall comfort you as I would comfort you if I were really there — for indeed I shall always be 'really there,' my blessing, even though you may not be able to see me. When you're a baby, and

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a boy, and a man; when you're good, and when you're bad; when you're victorious, and when you're defeated, I shall be near you, grieving for you in your sorrow, laughing with you in your joy, teaching you to know your mistakes and helping you to overcome them. You won't be your mother's own son unless you make a good many, and she will be so sorry for the birthday present she has given you, that if she did n't love you with every breath of her body, common decency would make her that she would have to share *that* burden.

There will be times, both as a child and as a man, when it will seem as if an end has come to everything, and there is not one person on earth who can help. It will not be true, for while life and reason last the end does not come. But when it happens, laddie, come away to me and we will talk it out together. We will be foolish together and wise

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together and at last strong together, because when I was in the world it seemed as if there were no furnace that I did not tread, and even though it blistered and seared, yet it taught me to know all the pain — and all the joy — that the earth holds.

And remember that whatever I tell you will not be ‘preaching.’ I only speak as a man would if he were to say, ‘Friend, the road is rough; take my staff and let it help you.’ I would help you when you were perplexed or sorrowful, but I know that I cannot live your life for you and I do not want to. I want you to make your own and to make it well. But which ever way you make it I am waiting for you just the same; never forget that.

Oh, little thing, if your mammy has to leave you and by any chance gets to Heaven, they won’t want her there very long! She’ll always be leaning out of a top-storey window, trying to catch sight of her baby as he goes

## Preface

out for his walk, or else forgetting to do her singing while she worries about his gaiters being long enough, or his vests warm enough. Heaven and earth will have changed places then and I shall be on the wrong side.

But I shall have had you all the beautiful time you were coming.

God bless you, little precious.

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I

On a Discovery



# I

## On a Discovery

**I**T was not for some time that I could make up my mind to tell Oliver — that is your father, little son — about your coming. After seven years it seemed too good to be true, and if it were not true I would not have him disappointed; for, although he never said much, I knew he wanted you very badly.

When he said, one morning at breakfast, ‘I am going to drive over to Hopwood’s Farm this morning,’ I said, ‘Well, you can drop me at the station on the way’; and I came up to town and saw the doctor.

It was as I had thought, but to know it to be true took all my strength away. I wanted

## Letters to My Son

no one just then but Nanny, the old Nanny who had washed and dressed and scolded and kissed me ever since I was a little scrap of a wriggling squealing baby — just like you, my precious, and by the time you can read this she will have done the same to you many times, I know; — so I got into a dingy old four-wheeler, because it seemed safer, and was trundled round to Clarges Street, where Nanny and Miles — Mr. Nanny, I used to call him — have their house.

Nanny opened the door to me herself. Miles was busy attending upon the second floor, she explained. Then she led the way into the sitting-room.

‘Come in here,’ she said. ‘These are your own rooms by rights, even though some one else has got them now; but he’s away.’ She shut the door and came towards me. ‘Ye’re looking tired, my bairn. What is it?’

I put my hands on her shoulders, and

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looked into her kind old anxious face.

‘Nanny, dear,’ I said, trembling all over, ‘I’m going to have a baby. It’s quite true. The doctor says so!’ Then I broke down; it was all so strange and unbelievable; and Nanny’s breast was there for me to cry upon; and I was tired.

We never quite get over being babies, no matter how old we grow; you’ll find that, mannikin. Nanny’s arms were round me and her voice was mumbling tendernesses as she put me on the sofa and took off my hat.

‘There, there! Nanny’ll find the pins. Don’t you bother, my precious.’ She plumped up the cushions. ‘Now lie back and rest: that’s better. To think of it! My bairn, that I’ve nursed and smacked, with a bairn of her own at last! What a limb he’ll be, too! I’m thinking ye’ll have to hand him over to me right away, or else there’ll be no doing anything with him. Just a moment now.’

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She went out of the room and came back with a cup of tea. 'Drink this, dearie; it'll keep you going till you get some lunch. And Mr. Nanny shall do you some cutlets his very own self. You don't forget Mr. Nanny's cutlets, do you?' She pulled down the blind, and covered me over; then, when she had petted and coaxed and fussed, she said, 'Now sleep, till I come to you again.'

'Nanny,' I said, holding on to her hand hard, 'you will have your lunch with me?'

'Of course I will, dearie, if you wish it; though what Miles will say to me eating his best cutlets in the best parlour, and him by hisself out in the kitchen I *don't* know.' She laughed at her joke, but her eyes were glistening. Then she bent over me and kissed me. 'Ye'll have a *good* rest, won't ye? For the bairnie's sake,' she whispered.

My son, you will never forget to be good to Nanny, will you?

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When I got home again it was half-past three, and Oliver had gone out for a ride. I told the maid to tell him when he came in that I had gone up to rest, and would come to the drawing-room for tea. But there was no rest for me. After I had chosen the gown that I knew he liked me in best, I went to my own little room to lie down. That room was just papered with pictures of your father, my precious, and I lay awake looking from one to the other, till at last I had to get up and visit them all in turn, from the fat one in the shell, that always makes him wild when he sees it, to the one in the leather frame on the mantel-piece, the one he had taken for me the day before we were married.

There was a funny little blur of an Oliver in a long embroidered robe and shoulder-knots; a cross little Oliver in a full frock and a top-knot; a jaunty little Oliver in a velvet suit and pearl buttons, with his legs carefully

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crossed and his head thrown back; a solemn little Oliver in an Eton collar; a fine young swaggering Oliver, with a pencil-mark of down on his lip, sitting astride the horse he had brought in a length ahead of the others at a country race-meeting; and the steady-eyed straight-browed Oliver who is the man of to-day. The one in the shell I call the little bath Oliver, beloved, because he has n't a stitch on. Don't you ever, if I am not there to protect you, let any one take you in a shell, no matter *how* beautiful your legs are! It's a shabby trick to play on a man when he's not able to choose for himself. Just you yell and slip and slither till they lose patience and *have* to dress you like a Christian, or at least like a Christianised heathen. Insist, at any rate, that there shall be a wisp of something behind which you can shelter from a jeering and a heartless posterity.

I found the shell portrait one day when I

## On a Discovery

was turning out a drawer in an old desk. On the back was written, 'Oliver John T——, aged one month; weight, thirteen pounds.'

'Oh!' I said, 'you improper person! Come and look at this.'

He was reading the paper by the fire.

'What is it?' he said, in a preoccupied sort of voice; then he looked up and caught sight of the picture.

'That beastly thing cropped up again!' he said (quite crossly for him, because he is n't at all a cross person really — as you will have found out by this, for yourself, honey). 'I thought I'd torn them all up.' He held out his hand for it.

I looked at it hard for a while.

'Give it to me, Madge.' He still held out his hand.

But I shook my head. 'No,' I said, stuffing it into the front of my blouse; 'I have another use for it.'

## Letters to My Son

‘You’re not to go showing it round at your tea-parties,’ he said in a panic.

‘You can trust me to do nothing that is unscrupulous,’ I said mysteriously; and he laughed and went back to his paper.

A week or two later I said, one day after lunch:—

‘I invite you to tea in my boudoir this afternoon.’

He made a bow. ‘It will give me very much pleasure,’ he said formally; then he looked at me out of the tail of his eye. ‘I wonder what you are up to now.’

I said nothing. That afternoon, when we had finished our tea, and he was hunting about on the mantelpiece for matches to light his cigarette with, he stopped suddenly.

‘Hullo, what’s that?’ he said, pointing to the wall.

‘That,’ I said, ‘is what I invited you up to see. It is arranged on the principle of the old

## On a Discovery

masterpieces in the continental cathedrals. Here you have a small brown frame; inside the frame is a curtain hung from a minute steel rod — in reality a knitting-needle. There is a cord attached to the curtain, and secured at the side upon this hook. I detach the cord from the hook, draw the curtain aside, and the masterpiece is exposed to view — so.' Oliver stared mutely at the hated photograph, under which were written the words, 'My Husband.' 'Then I pull the *other* end of the cord, and the picture is covered up again till the next party of tourists have paid their francs to see it. Neat, is it not?'

'Oh, you little stupid!' he said, when at last he had got his breath. 'Who rigged it up for you?'

'Old Jonas' — He is the carpenter, beloved — 'did all the mechanical part, and I put the finishing touches, which were the

## Letters to My Son

picture and the curtain. I explained exactly what I wanted and he carried it out, well, I think.'

He put his arm round my shoulders and stared at the frame, his mouth twitching.

'And what are you going to do with it, now you've got it?'

'Nothing; believe me, nothing,' I said earnestly. 'I only wanted to complete the collection, and as you seemed sensitive about it, I did it in a way least calculated to give you pain. You trust me, don't you?'

'Ab-so-lute-ly,' he said, kissing me a lot of times. 'You're a miserable little humbug.'

And that's the story of your father in the shell, my son.

After I had gone round all the photographs, I drew a chair up to the fire and sat listening for the sound of his horse's hoofs. Then it came to me that this was where I would like to tell him: in this little room that had all

## On a Discovery

sorts of sweet memories stored up in it. I rang the bell.

‘Tell the master I am here, when he comes in, Ellen, and we will have tea here instead of in the drawing-room.’

She went away. Presently I heard him ride into the yard. Ellen met him on the stairs.

‘The mistress is in her own room, sir,’ I heard her say.

‘All right, thank you. I’ll have my bath first. Just turn on the water for me, will you?’

He went off to his dressing-room and in a little while he was singing in his bath. Is n’t it odd, sonny, how *all* people, *always*, whether they make a beautiful noise or an ordinary noise or a hideous noise, sing in their bath? It just seems as if they’d got to. Ever since baths — with taps — began, they’ve done it; and as long as the world — with

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taps — lasts, they'll go on doing it. I'm sure you make an *awful* noise in your bath, now don't you?

And soon my heart jumped, for I heard him coming along the passage. There was a knock on the door and then it opened.

'Madge, are you here?'

He came into the room. I got up and went towards him. He put his arms round me and kissed me.

'I have n't seen you since breakfast. What have you been doing with yourself in town?'

Ellen came in with the tray. He went and sat in the easy-chair by the fire and pulled Trixie's ears as she lay at his feet: she is never far away from either his or his horse's heels.

'I had lunch with old Nanny,' I said, watching Ellen light the spirit-lamp under the kettle.

'Oh! How is she?'

## On a Discovery

‘Very well.’

Ellen went out and closed the door behind her.

‘Oliver, I went up to see the doctor,’ I said quickly.

He turned round sharply in his chair. ‘There’s nothing wrong, surely! Why did n’t you tell me? What is it?’

‘No, there is nothing wrong. I went to see him to make sure of something before I told you. I did n’t want you to be disappointed.’

He sprang up out of his chair.

‘It is not —?’

I nodded quickly. ‘Yes; he said I was right; it is true.’

He stood quite still, his arms down by his sides.

‘O Margie!’ he said at last.

And the tea was like ink when we came to drink it.

My little son, if you could have seen your

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father's face and heard his voice as he said, 'O Margie!' you would never hesitate to go to him with all your troubles, great and small.

## II

# On Shopping for a Very Young Man



## II

# On Shopping for a Very Young Man

SUCH a day I've had to-day, babykin; spending money all the time! Indeed, if you're not the handsomest man-child that ever lay in a bassinette it won't be the fault of Nanny and me, for we've set all the people working to weave you clothes that will make the fairies feel that they must put up their shutters at once and take to road-mending.

Oliver drove me to the station and put me into the train, and Nanny met me at Paddington with a brougham and Jenks on the box. Jenks used to drive for an uncle a long time ago, when I was a little girl; now he has re-

## Letters to My Son

tired from service and bought a carriage of his own, and he hires it out.

First we went and chose your cot and your basket: they're just the whitest, softest things that ever grew in a shop; and do you know, honey, the cot has got ribbon-bows on its ankles! It's *too* sillyanlovely!

That kept us busy till lunch, when Nanny and I and Jenks and the horse had a rest for a while, and after that we all started out again. I wonder if you'll ever have to shop for a baby? I don't mind telling you you'll have to have a very firm equilibrium, not to lose it, if you do. I'll just make a list for you now of a *few* of the things necessary to keep a little crumpled thing, that might n't weigh much more than half-a-dozen pounds, happy and warm. There are woven swathes and flannel swathes and night-flannels and day-flannels and night-gowns and day-gowns and long slips and embroidered robes and head-

## Shopping for a Young Man

squares and flannel squares and bibs and shoes — and I won't tell you any more things because I'm tired of writing them.

I would n't let them send the things from the shops because I wanted to look at them again before I went to bed; so Nanny stacked them on the seat beside me and I took them down in the train. When the porter had put them into the cart and we were driving home, Oliver said: —

'You seem to have brought the best part of London down with you.'

I said, 'Oh, no; I've only brought a few things; most of them are being made to order, and I am going to make the others myself. These are just some for patterns.'

'Good heavens, Margie! we'll have to move into the Town Hall if that's the truth.'

Belovedest, I'll tell you a secret. When he lifted me out of the cart, he kissed me. No one saw. There was Jackson at the pony's

## Letters to My Son

head, and Ellen at the door, and he stole it under their very noses. There was just one second when my face brushed his, and in that second he did it. Some day, my son, when you have a woman of your own, she'll tell you, if she's a real one and speaks the truth, that it is these little unexpected things that turn an ordinary world into a paradise.

After dinner that night we went to my room and undid the parcels; and I made Oliver guess what some of the most puzzling things were. It was lovely to see him turning a binder slowly round in his hands, his eyes going from it to me and back again to it, helplessly.

'Those are his corsets,' I said.

'Corsets!' he repeated bewilderedly.

'Yes; you don't know that all the very newest things, boys and girls both, have to wear corsets till their little insides have learned their proper place?'

## Shopping for a Young Man

‘I’m sure *I* did n’t,’ he said, putting it down and taking up a wisp of white stuff. ‘And what do you call this? It looks like a doll’s handkerchief with holes in it.’

‘I’m sure you did, or you wouldn’t be such a nice shape now,’ I said. ‘That is a shirt.’

He put two fingers through the arm-holes and looked at it wonderingly. Such a scrap of a thing it was, beloved, with its tiny little lace-edged armholes and its ridiculous little flaps. I watched Oliver.

‘Surely nothing ever born could be small enough to go inside that?’ he said in an awe-struck voice. Then a great tenderness seemed to come into his face and he looked up at me.

‘The little thing!’ he said slowly; and he held out his arms to me. I felt a laugh and a sob break in my throat, and I ran to him. Oh, honey!



**III**  
**On Day-Dreams**  
**and Cricket**



### III

## On Day-Dreams and Cricket

I'VE begun my sewing for you and I keep it in two baskets. Into the one I put all the *pernickety* things, like the shirts and the tops for the robes and the night-gowns. You see, they take a lot of thinking out and planning and arranging; and to do them well you have to give the whole of your attention to them. There are sleeves no bigger than a good-sized finger-stall, and shoulder-seams quite an inch and a half deep, and neck-places that look like wrist-holes, and wrist-holes that look like nothing. Then, when the bodies have had the sleeves set into them, and the sleeves have had the bands put on to

## Letters to My Son

them, and the bands have had the lace whipped round them, you've got to turn the whole thing on its face and make the loops for the buttons! It's no light matter, I can tell you, beloved, because you have to sew it all with stitches no bigger than a fairy's first tooth; and you'll know better than I can tell you what *that* means!

But into the other basket I put all the things with the long seams, and all the time I am sewing I am thinking of you and of what it will be like when you come.

There have been some fine spring days lately, and whenever the sun is shining Ellen carries a chair and the basket with the long seams out to the little grass-plot, where the apple trees grow; and I sit and sew and dream the whole of the lovely warm morning through.

I don't think there could be a lovelier spot than this in the world. This morning, as I

## Day-Dreams and Cricket

sat sewing, a little breeze was ruffling the stream that runs by the garden, and a great white butterfly was making love to a purple iris growing down by the rushes. On the other side of the stream the meadows were gold with buttercups. And every now and then, honey, the breeze would climb up into the apple tree overhead and whisper something to the blossom, and down would come a soft little fluttering petal as pink as the sole of your foot will be. I heard what the breeze said, although it never knew I did. It thought it was being very cute and quiet, but it was n't as cute as I was. I listened for it every time, and every time it went by it gave a nudge to the old tree and said, 'Blow him a kiss; go on, blow him a kiss'; and down would come the petals, and off would go the breeze, very satisfied with himself. He was a hearty little breeze, beloved, and I liked him extra well because he seemed so fond of you.

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And as I sit sewing, all your life opens out before me. I see you a little tender helpless thing, lying close in the hollow of my arm; I see you hoisted on your father's shoulder, shouting and beating the top of his head, your little legs twisted round his neck for safety, your limbs as lusty as your lungs. And I sit and watch the two of you come up from the meadows towards me, scarcely daring to believe that such joy could at last be my own.

This morning I was basting a long seam, and before I had done three inches of it you were ten years old and going to bat in your first school match. All the mothers and the fathers were going and it was to be a great day. Do you know, beloved, I could n't make up my mind which frock to put on! I had them all out on the bed and as fast as I chose one and got it half on it had to come off again. At last I put on a white linen and

## Day-Dreams and Cricket

a big hat with roses. No one can make a mistake with white, and when you were a baby you were very fond of roses.

Oliver and I drove over in time to get good seats in the little stand. You had gone directly after breakfast; you were a person that day and had to be on the ground early, so we did n't see you till you came into the field. Your side had lost the toss: that meant we were not going to see you cover yourself with glory for quite a long time. I'm sure all the boys who went in to bat did it very nicely, but I forgot to look at their scores very often, beloved, because all the time I was watching a little alert body quivering in the slips, or a pair of flannelled legs twinkling over to the boundary. And once, when you caught a man out, I nearly jumped up and clapped my hands; but I knew men did n't like their womenkind to make a fuss, so I kept quite still and said nothing.

## Letters to My Son

Then the other side went out and yours came in. You were fourth man in and it was n't long before you came stalking out to the wickets, bat in hand, head thrown back, just as your father walks. I sat up straight and clasped my hands in my lap. The first three wickets had fallen easily. But that would soon be altered. *You* were going to show the bowlers that they could take no such liberties with you; *you* were going to 'punish' them, were n't you, my son?

The bowler took a run and swung his arm, the ball flew through the air, and your mammy looked to the boundary.

There was a storm of applause, a groan from a boy beside me, and a lull. I looked back to the pitch.

Oh, beloved, you were n't running at all! The middle stump was lying flat, the bails were on the ground, and you were walking off the field with your head held higher than

## Day-Dreams and Cricket

ever. And you went through the gate as if you did n't see anything that was before you.

Nobody knew better than I did what you would have given to be able to cry. And it would n't have been cry-babyishness, either. You knew every one was looking to you and you felt quite able to do what was expected of you. Then, when that awful unexpected thing happened, it would be the sudden shock of it that would upset you; it's happened to me in other ways, too, honey, and I knew why your head was so terribly high as you walked away, and why your smile was so wide when you passed a master on the pavilion steps, who said, 'Never mind, young T——; better luck next time.' I knew why you went blindly into the first empty bathroom and shut the door and turned on the tap. A fellow could n't cry because he was bowled for a duck, so he walked like a mace-bearer and smiled like a sick Columbine. But he

## Letters to My Son

could n't have kept it up for longer than just to get through the crowd; and he rushed to hide somewhere till he could pull himself together; and he turned on the tap because he had to do something, and because the sound of the water splashing would keep any one from hearing the noises that were happening inside his throat.

Do you know, as I imagined it all, a lump came into my throat, and the tears dropped on to the work I was doing. I saw your father sitting up straight beside me, and although the only thing he said was, 'He came out to it too soon,' I knew he was minding very badly — for you.

Oh, I could n't leave it there! I made it a two-innings match, and when play ceased for lunch I made it rain and rain and rain till the wicket was like a sponge. Then, just as they were wondering if they would have to abandon the match, the sun came out, and the

# Day-Dreams and Cricket

clouds disappeared, and everything was blazing summer again.

But the rain had spoiled the wicket. I meant it to. The other side had put up a big score for yours to beat. Their men were going down like ninepins at the last, but they could afford to lose their tail, with such a comfortable balance as they had to their credit.

Then your side came in. Poor lambs! they could scarcely keep their feet standing, and when it came to run-getting, they were slipping about like a lot of old gentlemen on an ice-slide.

They made a brave attempt, but they went down one by one, till at last there were only three wickets to fall and twenty-one runs to get.

I know in an ordinary way that does n't sound a very big score to wipe out, but you'll understand that on this pitch it was a *terrible* task. Nobody ever thought they would do

## Letters to My Son

it, and the other side was beginning to get very cocky and our side was growing very quiet, when another wicket fell and you went in.

As you took your place at the wicket, a sandy-haired, freckled scrap of a boy next me shouted out, 'Go it, young T——!' and I saw you square your little shoulders and shake your head as if you were tossing the hair out of your eyes; and then you began.

O beloved! I did n't dare look at you. I just went on staring into my lap, waiting every minute for your stumps to go down. But as neither your father on the left of me, nor the sandy boy on the right, nor the boy for the other side, who was sitting behind me, said anything, I looked up at last to see what was going on.

'He's getting set,' said the sandy boy critically.

'Getting set!' said the boy behind, con-

# Day-Dreams and Cricket

temptuously. 'Who'll get set on a wicket like that?'

'Young T—— will,' said the sandy boy, sharp as a pistol-shot, turning round to face him. Then he turned quickly again to the game. I did n't kiss him, beloved, but it was n't his fault.

'He's playing the right game,' said Oliver, after a while. 'There's plenty of time, and he's not taking any risks.'

You went on sending the ball back quietly, but nothing happened. I suppose it *was* dull for the other side, but nothing was dull for me as long as you kept in. It's just the point of view, as you'll find directly you have one.

'Oh, hurry up!' said the boy at the back. 'What are you wasting time for?'

'Wasting time?' said the sandy boy, screwing round again and grinning ecstatically. 'He isn't wasting time; he's tiring the bowling!'

## Letters to My Son

There was a yell from the losing side, and the boy beside me shot into the air.

‘Well played, my son!’ said Oliver.

Honey, you’d hit a fourer so truly, that half-way down the pitch you knew you need n’t run for it, and you just walked slowly back to your crease like a gentleman with plenty of time to catch his train. And the margin narrowed in to seventeen, and the sandy boy contented himself with saying, ‘See?’ very tenderly to the boy at the back, and every one settled down to watch.

You went on getting some ones and twos very safely until you had left ten to win; then you hit one that looked like a boundary, but you had to run it. You had run three and were going for a fourth, when some one yelled, ‘Come back!’ But it was too late to turn back, so you went on as hard as you could. Oh, you could n’t do it! The ball had already been thrown from close in, and

## Day-Dreams and Cricket

you were only half-way up the pitch. It rolled in. If only you had n't —

‘Missed, by Jove!’ said Oliver.

‘Missed, you fool!’ shouted the boy at the back.

‘Missed, you beauty!’ yelled the sandy boy dancing like a dervish.

But quick as a flash the wicket-keeper had picked up the ball and knocked off the bails.

‘How’s that?’ roared the crowd.

‘Out!’ said the boy at the back, and the sandy boy and Oliver seemed as if they had forgotten to breathe.

And you, sonny? My heart gave a jump, and then seemed as if it had stopped beating. You were stretched motionless on the ground, your bat flung out in front of you. Were you hurt?

The umpire ran forward and peered, not at you but at the bat.

## Letters to My Son

‘Not out!’ came a thin voice from the field; and ‘Not out!’ screamed a hundred boys as their hats flew up into the air.

And you were n’t hurt, beloved: you were a great general that day; you were taking your only chance, and it won. You had realised that perhaps the bat and you together spread flat on the ground would be just tall enough to reach the crease and leave an inch inside; and when it was given, you were up on your feet, and back at your post like winking, to try for the half-dozen that lay between your side and the game.

Oliver forgot he was your father and yelled and shouted like the rest of them; the sandy boy turned round and shook the back of the bench we were sitting on with his hands, just as a puppy tears a rag to pieces with his teeth, and the masters called out, ‘Well done, young T——!’ and even the boy at the back clapped and said, ‘Good play,

# Day-Dreams and Cricket

little un!' And you were mine, honey; you were mine!

Then came the rubbing out of those six. No glory games and fireworks while one of them stood against you. The match was not won till the last run was got, and every run tried for on that pitch was a life. So the other two wickets — who were really bowlers and did n't expect to do more than keep their end up — just stone-walled while you slowly piled them up one by one.

And as you carried out your bat, I saw you look up with your dear eyes all shining into the grand stand, and I knew you were searching for me. I'd have known it, honey, even if you had n't told me afterwards. My head was up nearly as high as yours was after you had made your duck, — and I should n't be surprised if it were from the same cause, except that mine, if they *had* come, would have been happy ones, — and I felt myself saying

## Letters to My Son

inside, very hoighty-toightily, 'That is Oliver's and my son.' It was just as well the people did n't hear me, beloved.

But the only really active part I played in the affair was to rub you very thoroughly for some nights after with embrocation.

Do you know, the whole of that dream happened long before I had got to the end of my seam?

## IV

# On Love and a Misunderstanding



## IV

# On Love and a Misunderstanding

I'VE got a confession to make, beloved, and I think I will make it to you. All yesterday I was cross and bad-tempered and wicked. From the very first thing in the morning everything seemed to go wrong. I woke feeling cranky, but I remembered that Oliver was going to drive me over to lunch at a famous old inn some miles away, where you sat out under great cherry trees and ate food fit for an epicurean king. That made me perk up a little. I like my food, don't you?

Then I opened my letters. There was one from Nanny saying that, as Mr. Nanny had had to go to bed with a bad attack of influ-

## Letters to My Son

enza, she would not be able to come, as she had hoped to do, for the week-end; but she sent her dear love and hoped her bairn was taking great care of herself.

Her bairn was in such a bad temper that she almost went so far as to accuse Mr. Nanny of an intrigue with fate for the purpose of thwarting her in what then seemed the dearest and only wish of her heart. That is to say, beloved, she was evil enough to pretend that poor Miles had got influenza just to spite her and stop Nanny from coming.

The next letter was from the Stores. They had received my esteemed order, and were sorry to say that they had no more of the lace like enclosed pattern in stock, but were sending immediately to the makers, and would advise me in the course of a few days.

And I wanted to finish the robe that evening! It was too absurd, and ridiculous, and

# A Misunderstanding

exasperating! The whole management of the place needed reorganising.

I read the others with very little interest, and then Ellen came up with my breakfast. Beloved, the bacon was overcooked, and the egg was underdone! At least, I *think* it was, although a maturer judgment makes me wonder. Anyhow, Nanny not coming, and the Stores having no lace, made me sure it was then, and if there is anything I hate it is chippy bacon and an egg that runs madly all over the plate directly it sees the fork coming. I nibbled some toast, sipped some tea, then closed my eyes, and lay back wearily to wait for the end.

And it was n't long coming. In a little while there was a tap at the door, and Oliver came in, holding an open letter in his hand. His face was troubled.

'I'm afraid I won't be able to take you for that drive to-day, Margie,' he said in quite

## Letters to My Son

a nice and really sorrowful voice, if only I had been civil enough to notice it. 'Read this.'

I felt myself go faint and sick, and I held out my hand for the letter. A man with whom he had some business wanted him to lunch in town and talk it over; the man was leaving England that night.

'Well?' I said.

'There is nothing for it but that I must go,' he said regretfully; 'but it is an awful nuisance.' He sat on the edge of the bed and took my hand, playing with the rings on my finger. 'I hope you are n't very disappointed, dear; but we'll go to-morrow if it's fine; that will be almost the same, won't it?'

A sudden passion came to me to have what I wanted. I longed fiercely to go to-day; only to-day would do.

'Oliver,' I said quickly, taking hold of his hand with both my own, 'don't go. Stay; I

## A Misunderstanding

want you so badly.' I looked up into his face and waited. He *must* see what it meant to me.

He looked surprised. I knew he could n't understand it, and how could he be expected to, when I did n't understand it myself? I only knew how terribly I wanted. At any cost I must have.

'Don't go! don't go!' I repeated. 'Stay with me. I want you so!'

He came and put his arm round me. 'Poor old thing!' he said tenderly. 'I'm so very sorry, but what can I do? The business has got to be settled before he leaves, and he leaves to-night.' He put his cheek to mine and then kissed me. 'And even if I were not obliged to meet him, — which I feel I am, precious, — it's a matter of two hundred pounds to us, and I'm thinking that, while we won't starve for the want of it, two hundred pounds won't come amiss to buy feathers for the little peacock, will it?'

## Letters to My Son

He laughed coaxingly. I think perhaps it was that I wanted to hear him *say* that he would stay, as much as anything. If he would have said it, I would have got quite normal again and refused to allow him, and everything would have been all right. But he would n't say it unless he really meant to do it, and he could n't see that such a thing was possible.

I looked into his eyes hungrily. I would *make* him say it by sheer force of wanting.

He looked back at me, and his eyes were so troubled, beloved, that I nearly got sensible; but the devil must have been rampaging round all that day, for directly I heard him say, 'My darling, I must go,' as if he were trying to excuse himself, I got cold and sick again.

'Very well,' I said lifelessly.

But he was not content; he felt things were all wrong.

## A Misunderstanding

‘You know how much rather I would stay, don’t you? Tell me that you know, Margie.’

‘Yes, I know.’ But there was no warmth in what I said.

‘Well, kiss me and tell me.’ He put his face close to mine.

I turned my head and kissed him lifelessly on the cheek. He looked at me for a moment, then he took his arm away and got up. ‘I will go and write my letters now,’ he said quietly. ‘I shall have to catch the eleven-fifteen, and if I possibly can I will be back in time for tea.’ He went out and shut the door behind him.

I lay still, while all the spirits of evil raged about inside me. It was no use trying to remind myself how bad it was for you, precious: I was like one possessed. And all the while I lay quite still, staring at a spot on the wall. Then, suddenly I could bear it no longer; while my mind moved so furiously my body

## Letters to My Son

could not be quiet. I rang the bell and called for my bath to be got ready. While I was having it, I heard Oliver go into the bedroom, and then go away again. I went back and dressed. He did not come in again, and presently the cart was brought round to the hall door, but I did not go down to see him off. Just as he was about to start, I leaned out of the window over the porch, and waved, saying very airily, for the benefit of Jackson, 'Come back as early as you can.' I had to do that for the honour of the house, beloved, because, as a rule, I go to the door. And he waved back just as airily and called out good-bye; and then, when I had watched the cart to the very furthest bend in the road, I went to my room, dismissed the maid who was dusting there, and sat down on the couch and shivered as if I had the ague.

About half-past eleven, Ellen came in with a cup of soup. I looked at it with disgust,

## A Misunderstanding

although I felt as if I were melting away with hunger, or something of the kind. You see, I'd flouted the egg and bacon at breakfast, and I'd been living at pretty high pressure ever since.

'No, thank you,' I said, trying to speak very politely. 'You can take it away, Ellen.'

Ellen set it down with great care upon a little table, and placed the table beside the couch.

'The master said so, ma'am.' She gave the things on the tray a few critical touches, and went quietly out of the room.

When she had gone, I took up the cup and began to sip languidly. Soon I was drinking ravenously. It was nice clear soup with sherry in it, and every mouthful that I took seemed as if it were pulling me out of the pit. He's a very nice man, your father, honey, and a *very* beautiful one—in every way.

## Letters to My Son

After that I was just waiting the time away till five o'clock. Oh! I wanted him back again to tell him I was sorry, and to ask him to forgive me! I would n't deserve it, but I felt he would do it. I tried to dawdle through things to make the time slip away; but that, as I have proved, is n't the way to do it, so don't you be deceived into trying it. I could n't settle to anything. I wandered round the garden till lunch, and tried to go to sleep after; but it was no use. I lay with one eye on the pillow and the other on the clock, and made calculations of every moment spent since he had caught the eleven-fifteen train in the morning. He would get to town about twelve, go to his club, and ring up the man. Each would do what he had to do, separately, till one o'clock, when they would meet and lunch together. It would be early, but still they were both pressed for time, and neither would mind that. Generously I allowed them

## A Misunderstanding

an hour for lunch. That would give Oliver two hours' margin for extra things and to catch his train. He would not need it; but as there was a quick train down at four o'clock, it would get him home just in time for tea. And I — I would dress myself in the old soft gown that had been worn on so many historic occasions, and that would show him the minute he looked at me how sorry and penitent I had grown in the meantime. But I would tell him as well. Yes, beloved, when we do things, we do them *ab-so-lute-ly*, as Oliver would say.

I was dressed in the robe of repentance and down in the drawing-room by half-past four. The train would be just about arriving. He would take a fly and be here, if the train were up to time, in twenty minutes. I played a waltz, looked at an illustrated paper without seeing what was in it, wound some odds and ends of lace on a card, and then ran up to the

## Letters to My Son

bedroom window to watch for the fly. The minutes crawled on to five o'clock, and then fled to a quarter past. Unless there was a break-down or he had to walk from the station, he was n't coming by this train. At half-past five I went back to the drawing-room. Ellen came in.

'Shall you wait any longer for the master, ma'am?'

'No; you can bring the tea: he must have missed his train.'

He had missed his train, when he knew how much I was wanting him back! I broke up a piece of cake and spoiled a muffin, and poured out a cup of tea, but as for eating or drinking, it was out of the question. Every moment of the whole day I had been looking forward to this moment. He knew it, he *must* have known it; yet he had left me to have my tea by myself. Perhaps it only looked a small thing, but the great underlying principle was

## A Misunderstanding

there, none the less. He had appeared to be sorry at the moment, but a few miles of distance and a few hours of time were enough to wipe out any disappointment he might feel, and deaden him to any amount of pain that he might give.

I got out of my chair and went upstairs slowly. The next train got in at six o'clock, but I had no more longings left. I was not a child, even though I had behaved rather like one earlier in the day. I was a woman, a woman of thirty, and not to be played with and forgotten like a toy that had dropped from his hands. Very slowly and very coldly I took off the gown and put it back in the drawer; *that* had had its last wearing for a good time to come, if ever I put it on again. There was no revenge in the thought, beloved, only a great weariness and a sense of bowing to the inevitable. If it had come it had come, and there was to be no moaning over it.

## Letters to My Son

I put on a Japanese thing, and lay down to read till it would be time to dress for dinner. We would meet then, and by that time I would have trained myself to play my part. I would n't be angry, or injured, or protesting. I would be just as if nothing had happened — with a difference. I would smile, and say, 'Well, did you have a good day, dear?' And when he said, 'Yes, Margie, I was so sorry I could n't get back to tea, but you understood, did n't you?' I would say, 'Yes, of course; quite'; but there would be a *remoteness* that would be so small he would scarcely be able to notice it, yet it would make him wonder. Beloved, if you are a man when you read this, you will laugh, but everything I tell you was like drops of blood being squeezed from my heart.

Of course I had given up looking forward, but as the clock struck six my heart suddenly thumped like an engine, and although I tried

## A Misunderstanding

to read the book I held before me, my eyes were beginning to look out along the road, and my ears to strain for the sound of horses' hoofs on the flints.

Little son, he did not come. With a heart like ice and lead, I stared for an eternity along the road; then I turned and looked at the clock. It was twenty-five minutes to seven. Then it came upon me that something had happened. He might have missed the first train by a few minutes, and have had to wait for the next; but he would never have missed the next without wiring when he knew I was expecting him. I sat still, fear for him and the sense of my own helplessness holding me paralysed. I could do nothing. I did not know where he was. And I had let him go away in the morning with scarcely a word of good-bye, tacitly holding him guilty for that which was nothing more or less than an ordinary mischance of which he was as much

## Letters to My Son

the victim as I, although I, not being as fit physically as he, might suffer through it most. And what was it really, compared with what threatened?—A spoilt day that might easily be redeemed to-morrow.

If I could but know him to be safe!

There was a step on the gravel under the window, — a boy's step, — and the door-bell rang.

I held my breath to listen. The door opened, closed, and the steps went crunching over the gravel again. It was a telegram. I waited impatiently during the time it would take Ellen to bring it up the stairs. But no one came. They were opening it first; they were afraid to bring it to me. Something had happened, and I was being kept in the dark.

I rang the bell in a terror. Ellen came.

'Who was that?' I had to make my voice almost a whisper, or I felt it would have been a scream.

## A Misunderstanding

‘The boy with the local paper, ma’am,’ she said, and waited.

‘Bring it to me, please; I would like to see it.’ I had to say something.

She looked surprised, and went away. She knows I never read it. When she had brought it, I tore the wrapper off, and opened it out, looking stupidly over the advertisements.

Edward Bing and Sons were holding an unprecedented sale of drapery for one week only during which their famous make of ladies’ lisle-thread hose, usually sold at one-and-six-three, would be sacrificed at one-and-three-three, or half-a-crown for two pairs. There was only a limited stock of these, and intending purchasers were advised to buy early.

I could not tell my fears to the servants yet; there was still the seven train to come in; but when I had allowed for that, Jackson should go to the telegraph office.

## Letters to My Son

But whom should I wire to? There was only one person I knew him to have been with that day, and if I'd remembered what his name was and where he lived, it would be no use, as he would have gone by this. There was nothing to do but to wait.

The clock struck seven. Involuntarily my eyes turned to the window. No, not again. I ran to it, and dragged the curtains across, then I went over to the bed, and dropped down beside it, covering my eyes and stopping my ears with a pillow. I must shut away the sights and the sounds of the next half-hour, or I should go mad.

I don't know how long afterwards it was, but I heard a sound that made my heart stop. It was the scrunching of wheels on the gravel, and Oliver's voice under the window.

'That horse of yours is a good traveller, Jarvis.'

'He is that, sorr, and he's the divil to go

## A Misunderstanding

with an extra sixpence at his back. Thank you, sorr; good-night.'

Oliver laughed. 'Good-night.' The door of the carriage was slammed to, the man got up on the box again and drove off. Oliver came into the house.

And so, he was safe; there was nothing the matter! I stood up straight and took a deep breath. Mechanically I put the pillow back in its place, trying to think out things while I stroked the crumpled frills slowly and carefully. It is so strange, that, beloved, — how you find yourself in great mental stress doing little unimportant acts with your hands as if your very life depended upon the exactitude of what you were doing.

I had been in a frenzy of terror and pain because I had thought that nothing short of illness or accident could prevent him keeping his word. I had fretted and waited and

# Letters to My Son

longed all day for him, alone : he knew that. It might be stupid and foolish and unreasonable and childish, but it was true, and the pain of it was real enough. And there was excuse enough for it just now.

While he — ? He had his reasons, I suppose.

I heard him come along the corridor and stop outside the bedroom. I stood still, at the foot of the bed, — so still, beloved, that I wondered if I could ever move again.

‘Madge, are you there?’

‘Yes.’

He opened the door, and came towards me quickly.

‘My darling, have you been alone all day? I’m so sorry, but I had the very worst luck—’

He made as if to draw me to him, but I did not move.

‘Yes?’ I said patiently. ‘What was it?’

## A Misunderstanding

He looked at me sharply, but I kept my face in the shadow, and as the room was dim it helped me.

‘Come over here and sit down with me, while I tell you.’

His voice was very dear and kind, but I had no ears for it. I wanted to know *why*.

‘No, I don’t think I’ll sit down,’ I said. ‘I have been sitting down all day, and I am tired of it. What was it?’

Oh, honey, I was wicked, but I was just dazed with longings and fears and imaginings, and the reactions had been too many. I knew if I had given way one second in my hold of myself, I would have broken down altogether, and a stupid idiotic pride made me vow that I would n’t do that. To cry may be a silly thing to do, but it would have shortened *that* tragedy by some hours, because if I had cried your father would have forgotten every-

## Letters to My Son

thing and put his arms round me; and if he had once done that the end would n't have been so very far off.

He just looked at me, and then looked away again quickly, but not so quickly that I did not see the pain I had given him.

'It's not so easy to tell you when you ask like that,' he said quietly; 'but I will try. We could not get the business settled in time for me to catch the four o'clock train, and as I had so much time to spare for the next, I thought of something else I wanted to do, so I did it. I suppose it must have taken longer than I expected, because I just got to Paddington in time to see the train slip out of the platform. That made it that I had an hour to waste on the station.'

He looked up at me again and waited.

'Is that all?' I asked.

'Yes, that is all.'

He got up and went to the window, put-

## A Misunderstanding

ting back one of the curtains and staring out into the garden.

‘It does n’t seem quite enough,’ I said at last, ‘for the time I have put in at this end, waiting for you —’

‘I *know*, and I am sorry,’ he interrupted eagerly, turning from the window to face me; ‘but it was that second thing that landed me. If I had n’t been so interested in what I was doing I would n’t have missed the other train. Margie dear, let me tell you —’

He moved impulsively towards me.

‘Don’t you think,’ I said, going over to the dressing-table and taking up some stupid box thing, that I might seem busy, ‘don’t you think that, considering everything, the other piece of business you speak of might have waited till you went to town again? Was it of so very much importance?’

I spoke very slowly and *preciously*, beloved, because I had to make a tremendous

## Letters to My Son

effort to keep my voice quiet and unbroken. The reasons seemed such small ones, such paltry ones; and that he could consider them worth the offering nearly choked me.

He laughed, rather forlornly I know now, but then it only seemed carelessly, and it made me go wild again. 'I thought it was at the time,' he said, 'but it does n't seem so now.' He looked at me again, and waited; then he took his watch out quickly. 'It's getting time to dress,' he said. 'I had better go.'

When I was by myself again, I dropped into a chair and tried to gather myself together before dinner came. There was a very clever gentleman once, who said,

'To be wroth with one we love  
Doth work like madness in the brain';

and it is true, every word and every letter of it. I felt as if I had been beaten all over, and my heart was aching and heavy as a stone. Oliver's reasons made me feel lonelier than ever.

## A Misunderstanding

We talked at dinner about all sorts of stupid things, like crops and billiard-breaks and Armenian massacres, and then we went into the drawing-room, and Oliver read while I worked till ten o'clock. Once he said, rather anxiously, 'You look very dark round your eyes, Madge. Do you feel all right, or shall I ask Maxwell to call?' And I said, 'Oh, no; I am all right, thank you'; and he went on reading.

When ten o'clock struck I got up.

'I think I will go to bed now,' I said (for indeed, I was very weary, honey).

He went to the door and stood holding it open for me to pass.

'You look very tired,' he said kindly. 'Perhaps you would rather have your room to yourself to-night? I will go to the dressing-room.'

And the devil, before he finally went off duty for the day, gave one last whisper in

## Letters to My Son

the ear of my heart. He said, 'That husband of yours has had just about enough of your tantrums, my fine lady, and he's going to see that he gets no more to-night. Think *that* well over while you are lying awake.' Then he left me.

'Perhaps it would be better,' I said. 'Thank you, Oliver, and good-night.'

'Good-night, dear,' he said, 'and sleep well.'

But although there was a lingering sound in his voice, he did n't attempt to kiss me, and I went slowly up to bed, feeling just as I told you in another letter *you* would feel sometimes — as if the end had come to everything. Nobody wanted me. There was no one to blame for it but myself, and not one person could help me in all the world.

As I undressed myself, the tears kept dropping on my hands and down the front of my frock; and my eyes got so blurred that I could

## A Misunderstanding

hardly find the buttons and the hooks. And as soon as I was ready I turned out the light and crept into bed in the dark. Beloved, perhaps you've never in all your life felt more desolate than I did then.

When I was in bed, Ellen came and knocked, to know if there was anything she could do for me. But I said, 'No, thank you,' and she went away down the corridor. And I knew somehow, that Oliver had sent her, and that I need not expect him now (as I *had*, at the back of my mind, beloved, even though I had n't admitted it) to come in unexpectedly; and I just turned my face to the pillow and wondered why such a worthless person as I must have been from the first, should ever have been allowed to grow up.

Then, after a long time, I heard Oliver come up, and as he passed my door it seemed as if he paused a moment; but he went on, and presently I saw the light shining through

## Letters to My Son

the crack of the door that opens into the bedroom, and I heard him moving quietly about. And I knew he was being quiet so that, if I were asleep, he should not wake me.

It made me think of all the kind and the sweet and the thoughtful things he is always doing, quite simply, as if they were only just ordinary things, as indeed they are with him. Then I went back over the day, and I saw it all as it was. If I had waked quite well nothing would have gone wrong. Of course I would have been sorry that we could n't go for the drive, but it would n't have been a matter of life and death. As for his missing the train, it was just the stupid kind of thing that might happen to anyone. And it was the most natural thing in the world that, with half-an-hour to spare, he should use it to save himself the bother of a journey up again. The whole thing was what I in my best moments would call 'a concatenation of unfortunate

## A Misunderstanding

events,' and you, beloved, 'a string of bad luck.'

And I remembered, too, how he had tried to explain, and to make it up, and I would n't let him. I was longing to all the while, but the very fact that I wanted to so badly seemed to make it impossible.

I felt my heart go right out to him, and I wondered if he were quite comfortable in his dressing-room and if he had everything he wanted.

Then, suddenly, it came to me that he had not slept in that room for weeks, not since one night when I had gone up to town and stayed with Nanny till the next day. Perhaps he had not told Ellen he was sleeping there, and the sheets would not be aired. And he would get a chill, and it would settle on his lungs, and he would die, and it would be my fault! Oh, I had n't any pride left then, beloved. If he would only come back, I would n't ask him

## Letters to My Son

to forgive me. I got up and went to the door.

He was standing with his back to me. His coat was off, and he was holding an old pipe to the light and poking a wire down the stem of it. When he saw me, he put it down and came towards me.

I ran to him. 'Oliver,' I said, speaking very fast, 'I don't want you to forgive me. I know it has all been my fault and it seems as if I had been so horrid that I could n't expect you to; but I have n't meant to be bad, and if you will come back to-night I will have this room made ready for you to-morrow, and you can sleep in it as long as you like. Only come back to-night!'

He put his arms round me. I think he thought I was dreaming.

'What is it, Margie?' he said, sitting down and drawing me on to his knee. 'Tell me all about it.'

## A Misunderstanding

‘The sheets are n’t aired!’ I said with a sob; it was so lovely to hear his voice again.

He looked puzzled; then a light seemed to break upon him.

‘Do you mean on this bed?’

I nodded. ‘Yes. You did n’t tell Ellen you were going to use it, did you?’

He threw back his head and laughed over and over again.

‘Do you know,’ he said at last, ‘I thought you were dreaming. I could n’t make out what you were driving at.’ He laughed again. ‘You poor old thing! You were afraid I was going to be hurt, were you?’

I put my cheek to his; the very sound of his voice, and the feeling that I was *safe* again, made the sobs come into my throat, so that I could n’t speak.

‘And rather than that, you would take me back again, eh?’ He rubbed his face against mine softly.

## Letters to My Son

The tears were pouring down my cheeks and running on to his own, but he did n't seem to mind.

'You wanted to be here,' I said when I could speak.

'Little stupid!' he said tenderly. 'I only wanted what was best for you. You looked such a poor tired thing, that I thought you might rest better so. Now lie still, and tell me why you were so angry with me?'

He pulled a rug from the bed and covered me up with it. And I told him everything from beginning to end. About feeling ill when I woke, and Nanny and the lace and the splashy egg. And then the great disappointment of not going for the drive, and being sorry when he had gone that I had shown it so, and making up my mind to let him know, and his never coming. And how I had gone up into the bedroom and watched and listened, and when he did n't come by

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the second train how I had nearly gone mad with fear lest anything should have happened to him; and how I had wanted to telegraph, and did n't know any one to telegraph to. And then how he had come in, and the only reason he gave was that he had stayed to do something else, and that had made him miss the second train, and when I asked if the thing he had waited for was of so very much importance, he had laughed and said p'raps it was n't, and I had felt I wanted to die.

All the while I was telling him, he was scanning my face very gravely, and once he said, as if to himself, 'A man does n't understand; a man does n't understand.' Then, when I had finished, he said, still very gravely, 'Poor little thing!' (I'm not little, honey, and that's why it's so nice) 'you shan't be left again, unless you have Nanny or some one with you.'

And I said very quickly, 'Indeed, I shall,

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Oliver. I'm not going to have you think you've got to stay at home to mind me. You *would* get to hate me then!

And he laughed, and kissed me as if he had n't begun to yet, and I just lay back and felt sorry for every one who was n't me.

After a while, he put his fingers into his vest pocket and pulled something out. I sat up, and looked to see what it was.

It was a small, flat, velvet case, and when he opened it I saw a little pendant of emeralds set in diamonds and platinum and threaded by a thin platinum chain.

'Oh!' I said, 'how lovely!' Then suddenly I felt myself go crimson.

'That was not what made you miss —' I could n't go on.

His eyes twinkled, and he nodded.

I turned away from it and hid my face against him. I felt too ashamed and too small to be able to look at it again. And whenever

## A Misunderstanding

I feel my senses are on the point of leaving me, beloved, I shall just take out the little pendant and look at it steadily, and if it does n't set me right in a trice, I shall know I am past all human aid.

He tried to make me look at it, but I could n't, then, so he laughed at me and put it back into his pocket.

But when he had carried me back to bed, and was in his dressing-room again, I called to him and said, 'Bring it back with you when you come, please, Oliver; I would like to have it beside me.' And he brought it back and put it down on the table; and I touched his hand very respectfully and said, 'I think you are just the most beautiful thing that ever was, inside and out.'

And he bent over me, and kissed me hard and quickly, and said, 'And you are the greatest stupid!' Which won't read as exquisite as it sounded.

## Letters to My Son

This letter may seem only the story of a cross-tempered woman and a fine-hearted man when you read it first, beloved, but as you get older you will find there is more in it than that. It will tell you that the face value of a thing is sometimes a false value, and that the same thing will be honestly and totally dissimilar looked at by two people from different points of view. Those may be obvious and well-worn truths, but it is perhaps just as well to have a human application of those truths, so that, when one's own time comes, one may have just a glimmer of what *may* be to distract from the blaze of what *appears* to be.

And it will tell you that love — of which some quaint people deny the existence — has got to be great enough not for the big things but for the small things. When I thought that Oliver was in danger, I was ready to go barefoot over hot ploughshares to get to him;

## A Misunderstanding

but when it came to giving him the benefit of the doubt over the catching or the losing of a train, I was wanting. It's no good talking about the greatness of a thing unless you are able to apply it; and what so often gets love into disrepute is the fact that when it is put to small everyday uses, it fails, not because it is n't a good thing for the purpose, but because either the people who use it have n't enough of it, or else they don't know what to do with it when they *do* get it.

But I think we'll talk about that another day, honey. I feel as if I had a lot to say upon the subject.

And going back to the history of my bad behaviour, you've got to make a *little* excuse for me because you were just a bit to blame yourself. Only don't worry about that.



V

On Fathers and  
Mothers



V  
On Fathers and  
Mothers

I WONDER, if all the little honeys and belovedests that get born into the world, and grow up to look upon their fathers and mothers as people to whom they go for their pocket-money and their wiggings, were suddenly to see into the hearts of those fathers and mothers, whether they would ride roughshod over them for ever and ever and ever, or whether they would draw a long breath of relief and be very, very glad.

I know it is in the minds of children to believe that fathers and mothers are *born* fathers and mothers, and never could have been young or stupid or unregenerate like

## Letters to My Son

themselves; that is one of the reasons why they so often go to any one rather than to their parents with whatever scrapes they may be in. And it's true, honey, that the parents have themselves to blame for such neglect. They are so anxious to set a good example that they deliberately forget their own experiences and seem to think that they can keep *you* from having measles by pretending that they never had them themselves.

Now it is very highly probable that every parent worth his salt has had pretty nearly every measles that is likely to dog the footsteps of his graceless offspring (when you are old enough, you will appreciate the beauty of that phrasing), and it is his duty — and ought to be his pleasure — to admit it, not with vain boasting, but simply, in order that, if the need arises, he with his experience, may show the way through; for there *is* a way through, my son, even though it is nothing

# Fathers and Mothers

better than sitting down at the foot of the blank wall and waiting. I who speak to you have waited, and I know.

I want you once and for always to get it out of your dear little head that Oliver and I are Grown-ups with a capital G, and therefore incapable of understanding the joys and pleasures and pains that belong to you as a child and a boy. Oh, beloved, we are n't *really* old, although Oliver rides a horse without a groom at his bridle, and I have n't worn pinafores for *quite* a long time. But our hearts ride their ponies and tear their pinafores just the same as ever, believe that.

And I'll tell you a secret. It's a shameful secret for a woman with a grey hair (I got it when I was twenty — the hair, beloved); and although Oliver knows it, — and I dare say one or two others do, as well, — I try to keep it from spreading any further than I can help. Still, if we ever meet, you are bound to find it

## Letters to My Son

out; and if we don't, perhaps it will help you to overcome your own weaknesses to know that your own grown-up mummy was every bit as bad as you and badder.

It's this, come very close and bend down while I tell you. *Nothing ever really teaches me, and I've never really grown up.* To-day, with that grey hair in my head that I got at twenty, and a man-child of my own to be thinking of, I'm just as much in the school-room as I was at ten. Perhaps from it all I have got this one bit of knowledge, that when I can see no way out I sit down at the foot of the wall and wait. But for the rest my lessons are just as hard to learn and give me just as much pain and tribulation as they did when I was doing nine-times-seven, and thirteen goes-into-a-hundred-and-four-I-don't-know-how-many-times-or-what-over.

So, you see, with a record like that it would n't be the least bit of use me climbing

## Fathers and Mothers

on to a pedestal, and trying to play the oracle, because I have no capacity for giddy heights at all. Give me the ground under my feet, and the top of the mountain is mine for the climbing; but stand me on a rampart, and I shut my eyes and clutch till somebody comes and takes me off. But if you don't mind I'll give you the benefit of my experience (you'll let me do that, please, beloved), and then we'll take hands and climb the mountain together.

And I want to tell you a little about this father of yours. He's down in the garden tying up carnations at this minute, and I can see his broad shoulders bent over the flowers and his nice brown hands twisting the twine. A little while ago he looked up and saw me in the window and he called out:—

'What are you doing up there? Come down.'

'I can't,' I said. 'I'm writing.'

'Who to?'

## Letters to My Son

‘To a young man in whom I take a great deal of interest. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more.’

‘All right. I’ll come up and see if it ought to go.’

He was filling his pipe very carefully and watching it as he did it.

‘Indeed, you’ll stay where you are, and I’ll come down when I’m ready.’

I blew him a kiss and came back to you. Oh, beloved, I think you *will* like him most awfully.

Now, if you’re in a tangle over anything to do with dogmas and doxies (I won’t give you the dictionary meaning of these words because it would be a waste of labour; when the time comes for you to know, you will find out quickly enough), I’m afraid it won’t be much use going to Oliver for explanation, because the darling does n’t know anything about them. But if you want to know what it

## Fathers and Mothers

is to live finely, cleanly, courageously, watch him, my son, and see him do it. When I think of him and his way, it puts me in mind of an algebra mistress I had when I was a child. She could do algebra and Euclid standing on her head and with her hands tied behind her back, so to speak, but she had n't an idea of telling *you* how to do it. I could n't do it anyhow. I used to say despairingly, 'How do I do it?' and quite simply she would say, 'This way'; and it would be done in a twinkling.

Then I would say, 'Yes, but how did you do that?' and she would say again, this time with bewilderment, '*This way!*' and pff! there it was, like a magic-lantern slide, and I as far off as ever.

This Oliver of ours, beloved, is just as good at his job as she was at hers, and just as unable to tell you how he does it. But you need n't get the idea into your head that there

## Letters to My Son

is any icy perfection about him. He does n't *know* he's good, and if I were openly to accuse him of the things I have been telling you, he would be as uncomfortable as a cannibal in a court suit. I can imagine him now, listening first in astonishment, then in embarrassment, and at last, very red, getting up and feeling in his pockets for his pipe and saying with an uneasy laugh: —

'Don't rot so, Margie; where are the matches?'

But that unconsciousness does not mean that he cannot feel things. I know how deeply he feels, and how much easier it might have been sometimes if he had been able to express with his lips what was stirring and agitating in his heart. There are people who cannot speak because they have nothing to say, and there are others who cannot speak because they have too much; and often one sees people being credited with a reserve

## Fathers and Mothers

which is really no reserve at all, but a lack of feeling, while others are called shallow because their feelings are greater than their power of concealment. One learns all that in time. With Oliver it is an inability to formulate, to express. When he is happy one feels the sunshine radiating from him; when he is unhappy his eyes tell you, but he himself is dumb.

At first I used to feel 'held off' by his silence. I did n't understand, and it seemed as if he were deliberately closing a door upon me: but once in a moment of perhaps more than ordinary clear-sightedness, I said something that caused him to turn to me with a look of sharp relief on his face. Afterwards he said with admiration lighting his eyes, 'You're a wonderful thing, Margie, you always say what every one else only seems to be able to *think*'; and I was glad, because it made him come to me instinctively as to one

## Letters to My Son

who would understand his unspoken thoughts. But it made me feel humble enough, beloved. He in his strong simple inarticulateness seemed like a huge hill upon which I, a little conning tower, stood perched in my glibness. I have laughed, oh, so many times, at his pride in my wonderfulness; for he was like a giant setting a child on his shoulders and calling the child a greater than himself. And the thing that always makes me laugh with a lump in my throat is that this giant really believes it.

So you see, if you listen to your mummy and watch your father, you stand a very good chance of being all that a perfect creature ought to be; but being the son of your father and mother, I'm thinking you'll have to find your own way your own self, and you won't reach perfection through merely seeing it and hearing about it. Still, you won't despise a lantern on a dark night, will you?

# Fathers and Mothers

And let me tell you, for the breaking down of that barrier which rises up so often between parents and children, who, in spite of it, love each other very truly, — that parents are often as shy of their children as their children are of them; often as diffident in asking their confidence as they are of tendering it; often as longing to receive it as they are to give it. It is too *much* and not too little feeling that has built up that barrier; but I believe, honey, that as the world grows older we will grow wiser and less self-conscious about the things that matter. Science is helping towards that, by finding simple natural reasons for things that were at one time regarded as visitations of God or the devil. We do not so often confuse innocence with ignorance and call it beauty as we once used to do. We are learning to look at life more truly, and although it means the sweeping away of a great many things that were once thought to be beautiful,

## Letters to My Son

it means that we are finding there is nothing really beautiful that is not built upon truth, and that the plainest truth is beautiful because it is a truth.

It is true that parents, who are but children of a larger growth, must for the benefit of the young thing exact obedience till the time for explanation comes. But they have no right to retard the moment of explanation beyond its appointed time. It is a beautiful desire, to want to shield and protect the thing one loves, but it ceases to be beautiful, and becomes untrue, when, instead of protecting, they would wilfully blind, wilfully keep in the dark.

When you are in swaddling clothes and cry for the candle-flame, your little hands will not be allowed to grasp it; later on, when you are able to understand what is being said to you, you will be told that the flame will burn and hurt you; but later still, if nothing has convinced you and you still weep for it, you

## Fathers and Mothers

shall be allowed to touch it and find out for yourself. I myself have cried for the candle-flame, and when the time came I burnt my fingers. If I had been given it too early I should probably have blamed some one else for the pain I got; when it was kept from me longer than it should have been, I broke guard to get to it and blamed no one, not even myself.

So it will be for you, little son. The candle shall be placed high on the shelf till the time comes for you to choose whether you will burn yourself or keep away; and with everything freely explained you shall take your chance. But we would be untrue to you and to life and to everything, if we tried to bring you up in a dark room without any knowledge of candles at all, and then suddenly flung you out into a world that was dotted all over with them. Remembering that, will you come to either Oliver or me if you want to know

## Letters to My Son

anything? Whatever it is, however evil or dark or wrong it may seem to your understanding, it won't matter, because at the back of the darkest difficulty there generally lies a reasonable explanation, and one does n't live a very long time in this world with one's eyes open without coming across most of what there is to be seen in it. And remember, too, little man, that Oliver was at school and at college just as you will be, and he was confronted with just the same problems that are confronting you, and assailed with just the same temptations that assail you. And he is so wise and so kind, this Oliver, who can build bridges to carry people over but cannot tell you how he built them, that you need never fear rebuff or misunderstanding from him. Even if one had yielded time and again to the temptation he had resisted, he would have no thought of judgment in his heart. His only care would be to find something in his under-

# Fathers and Mothers

standing that would be of use; just as a man may search his pockets to find the sum your necessity demanded, and look concerned for fear he should not have enough.

And some day, honey, when you have a troupe of little honeys all your own, the thought of what your father was to you, will help you to be all that to them. We can pass on a lot in this world if we only think a bit.

I do love you very much, my little thing.



VI  
On Anger

There are two letters that I've put together into one envelope, the ones on Anger and Religion. If you find them rather dull, a bit pi-jawish in your manner of speaking, just put them back in the envelope and don't bother about them any more. They are n't pi-jaw, they are my mind going out to meet your mind in its extremity, and if they don't strike you that way, it's because your extremity is n't there and you have n't any need of them.

But fo' de Lawd's sake, honey, don't you tear your mummy up, she'll come in useful one of these days if you only keep her long enough, believe *me*.

## VI

# On Anger

**T**HIS morning as I sat working I was thinking about anger and all things to do with it. There was a famous man once who said that no man was great who was not vindictive. It worried me rather that such a fine person as he should have believed such an un-fine thing, and it troubled me more when I sat down to think it out and saw how true it looked on the face of it.

I went back through my own life, and knew how, over and over again, I had lost the situation because pain and not rage had been the feeling uppermost; not the kind of pain that wants to turn and rend, but the pain that

## Letters to My Son

makes one cover one's eyes and run out into the darkness, — anywhere, — to be out of sight and sound of that which has caused the hurt; for to fight with that pain blinding your eyes and that desolation bewildering your brain was impossible. One could only turn and hide like a sick animal in the thicket.

But with the reaction would come a feeling of passionate anger. I had been in the right yet I had been routed. I was the one who had been despoiled, yet I had fled like a thief. Where was the justice of it all? Why was I allowed the strength to fight and win in all the skirmishes that did n't matter a jot, and denied it in my Armageddon? A coat of mail was given to me with which to protect myself from the snapping of a finger, and torn off as the arrows rained down. I would go back and fight the battle over again. Might was not right, the just *should* triumph, the

## On Anger

unjust *should* be made to see his injustice. I trembled with the thought of all that I would do.

Then, as in imagination I strode back, head up, eyes shining, and breast out, to the battle-ground, the remembrance of what had happened came over me. The pain clutched my heart afresh and closed my eyes, the futility of things dragged at my heels, and I crept back into the darkness again, glad to be nothing.

In the darkness I cursed myself for a poor thing and a coward. I compared myself with one I knew, and wished to God I were like her. I saw her in her battles always victorious, always triumphant. I saw her stand insolent and smiling, giving back twice over taunt for taunt, insult for insult, scorn for scorn; and I saw her at the end bitter but unbeaten with high heart rejoicing in her victory. She would never forget, she would never forgive, and

## Letters to My Son

her hatred of her enemy would grow stronger and surer as time went on.

To me, then, she seemed a great and enviable person, for at least she could always count upon the fear and the respect of her enemies; while I, with my miserable puling sensitiveness, had not a rag to cover myself with. The thicket was no blacker than my heart, choked as it was with rage and pain and humiliation.

But, once, little son, as I lay face downward in the dark, there came the sound of a bird singing. It was singing in the branch of a tree far down the coppice, and I sat up and listened. It sang a few notes, then it stopped. I waited, and as I listened for the bird I heard the sound of running water.

The bird began again, very softly and only a few notes at a time. Then at last it went off into a pure clear exquisite song, so full, that it seemed as if the little trembling throat

## On Anger

would burst. It sang all the joy and the gratitude and the freshness that ever was in the world; and as it sang, the heart and mind of me grew still and quiet. I seemed to understand then, beloved, — even though I forgot it many times afterwards, — that while it might not be given to me to win in a pitched battle, yet it was open to me to give the lie to my failures by living as truly as I could every day; and I knew, too, that so long as neither hatred nor malice took real root in my heart, so long would I be allowed to hear the running water and the song of the bird and be comforted by them. It is a finer strength we gather from that than from any stimulant brewed from the poison of malice, and it is a tonic that *gains* and not loses with every dose we take.

Perhaps this will be a little puzzling to you if you read it when you are a very young thing; but what I have wanted to say to you

## Letters to My Son

is that the great man was wrong when he called vindictiveness strength. It *is* strength, just as a crutch is strength, but you must learn to be strong enough to walk without crutches, and as a crutch would in reality hamper and retard the perfect man physically, so vindictiveness would do the same mentally by poisoning and corroding all the fine things that were in him.

Anger, righteous anger, is a fine thing, and it is right to feel it. Like a fire it cleanses and purifies, but like a fire it makes a better servant than master, and you must learn to order it instead of letting it order you.

If ever you are in such a passion that you feel you are going to blow up right away, I should advise you — provided you know how to keep your hands in your pockets — to let it go, because such a volcano is better out than in. But prefer to let it run out of your heels rather than your mouth or your fists.

## On Anger

Walk, my son, walk as if the devil were driving you — as perhaps indeed he may be; and if you are not better when you come in, go straight to your father and ask him to take you to the doctor.

There is one thing, apart from any jesting, that I want you always to remember. Whatever your disturbances of mind, whatever your perplexity, your pain may be, go *out* to do battle with it. What I told you about the running water and the song of the bird is no sentimental picture, but a simple truth. There is something in the wind that cleanses, something in the very touch of the earth under your feet that revivifies and makes strong again; and you never once go to nature in your unconscious years that she does not return the visit in the years of your understanding and know you again for the child that needed her.

Perhaps, littlest, I seem to be talking in

## Letters to My Son

riddles again. Never mind, you will know it all to be very simple some day, and in the meantime this is what your mother is struggling to say to you:—

If ever anything happens that makes you feel horribly bad, or even just bad, inside, go and take a ride on your pony, or roll the lawn, or throw stones in the pond, till you find things are getting easier. *But don't ever brood indoors if you can help it.*

Of course, honey, I mean that as a medicine for heartache; it would n't quite do for tummy-ache; that will be Nanny's or my affair.

VII  
On Religion



## VII

### On Religion

SOME of the things I want to say to you, although not profound, are a little difficult to write, beloved. There was a singing-master I once had who used to be very angry when any one said anything about upper and lower and middle registers in the voice. He said they were wrong, that one should sing without thought of breaks, and that to make divisions was simply to make trouble. When he talked I used to feel how right he was, and how stupid the other way seemed: just like taking a whole piece of cloth and tearing it into three for the sake of joining it up again. But afterwards I wondered. I wondered

## Letters to My Son

whether all voices could be dealt with so simply; and whether some which might be very good in parts might not want a *conscious* treatment to strengthen the weak places and make the whole perfect.

So it is in talking of some things to you. I don't want to suggest difficulties that do not exist, but I feel that you would be a very unusual person if you could go through life quite undisturbed by the troubles that disturb so many of us. And taking into consideration the fact that you are, in part, your mother's own son, I don't think a helping hand will come amiss. So I'll leave the medicine on the shelf; but you need n't take it unless you feel sick, honey.

There's a thing called religion that plays a pretty big part in the world; and you won't be very old before you hear such things said in the name of it, and see such things done under the guise of it, that your poor brains

## On Religion

will be a-whirl with perplexity and amazement.

You will find people apparently serving under the same banner, upholding the same cause, recognizing the same Head, who are yet fighting between themselves as if they were the fiercest and most implacable enemies; and fighting over the very thing they all seem to be agreed upon. You will find people professing beliefs they have never tested, simply because their fathers believed such before them, and they are too lazy and too indifferent to think for themselves. And, what has sent a good many students off the rails before now, you will find men of repute and honour deliberately teaching the thing they have ceased to believe in, because they either have not the courage to break away or are too comfortable by the hearth such teaching has given them.

Now I am not preaching revolt to you for

## Letters to My Son

the sake of revolt, indeed I am not preaching it at all. I am just telling you of things that you must inevitably come across, so that when you do, you shall not lose yourself in a slough of despair, but sit down quietly and squarely to face them.

You come of a Protestant stock and you will be brought up in the Church of England. When you are able to speak, you will say your prayers to the Jesus who was a baby and a boy and a man Himself, and when you are big enough, you will go in your Sunday best to sit in a high pew once a week, and fall asleep against your mummy's arm — oh, beloved, if I am there! Later on, when you are n't quite such a torpid little dormouse, you will stop going to sleep and sit up and listen with your ears, and later still you will listen with your understanding, and then you will ask questions. And when you begin to ask questions, out of your need, man-let, you

## On Religion

have put your hand upon the hasp of the gate that leads to the Garden of Bewilderment and the garden is only the *beginning* of the journey.

The trees in that garden will be mostly finger-posts, and the flowers chiefly flowers of speech, and many times you will long for green boughs that shelter and for flowers that speak only through the sweetness of their breath. And you will get so tired with the din and the noise and the racket that you will want to put your fingers in your ears and run right away from everything and everybody, including yourself.

But before you go, honey, come here a while and listen. That sounds as if *I* were going to be a finger-post, does n't it? Well, I'm not; I'm just going to take your dear little hands in mine for a moment and tell you of the trees I found for myself — and that others have found too — in the garden

## Letters to My Son

through which we must all go if we've got any intelligence, or curiosity, or imagination at all.

I want you to think of God, not as an all-powerful, all-seeing High Priest of Heaven and Judge of sinful man, but simply as a Spirit of Good which is everywhere, if one likes to look for it. Think of Jesus Christ as a man who lived according to the truth which was in Him, just as you must do; and read what He says, not as one would read of miracles, but as one would listen to the words of some one who spoke lovingly and out of his own experiences.

There are people who will say that unless you believe that Christ is the Son of God and the Virgin Mary, you have no chance of going to Heaven at all; and there are others who will tell you there is no Heaven to go to.

I don't know, sweetheart; you must 'listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.' It

## On Religion

seems to me that all the belief in the divinity of Christ that a world holds is n't going to give us an inheritance if we have lived otherwise untruly, nor all the doubt keep it from us if we have lived as honestly as we knew how. And it seems, too, as if it would be so much better not to worry our heads about a future existence and the rewards attached to it. *Now* is the appointed time. The revivalists use those words to frighten what they call poor sinners on to their knees; but I would not have you on your knees, I would say it to you that you might be up and doing. *Now is* the appointed time, beloved, the time for work, for play, for joy, and for sorrow. You can surely worship more truly by living truly than by all the prayer and meditation you can crowd into a life full of years — and by living truly, I don't mean according to the truth as it is told you, but according to the truth as it tells itself to you. You are bound

## Letters to My Son

to make mistakes; very likely the things that are truths to you to-day will be doubts to-morrow; but *while* they are truths you must stand by them, even though you are going against all existing truths — or conventions — by doing it. But be very certain that they *are* truths to you before you begin your opposition, and while you are hesitating, again remember the words of one whom you will read some day: 'You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.' Don't fight existing truths just for the sake of fighting; but if there is anything in you which challenges them, keep them by you till you can test them by the acid of your own experience, and then say what you will and do what you must.

And if the God of Churches, or the God of Reason, fails you, go out to that other God, the God of the open world. He will speak to you in the wind and the trees and the sky. He will tell you great unspoken things in the

## On Religion

swaying of the branches and the beating of the rain, and dear tender things in the blades of grass and the cool fronded streams. He will make you that you are not afraid when you are with Him.

Sometimes, little son, before I was happy with your father, I have left the house and gone stumbling up the hill, with such pain tearing at my throat and blinding my eyes that I could scarcely see where I was walking. And I have come back sane and with my head up. The pain was still there, but a cool hand had been laid upon my head and the frenzy was gone. And if you are like me, you will get more peace and strength from the sound of the wind in the trees than from all the books of philosophy that ever were written. When I was trying to fit myself in with everything that man ever said, like the poor gentleman with the ass in the fable, I used to worry terribly because no written

## Letters to My Son

creed could give me what I got from waving grass or running water. I was brought up like a dutiful child, to believe that everybody older than I must know better than I *because* he was older. It's a good and necessary thing to believe, as long as you ought, beloved, because it saves you from a heap of your own mistakes and also from being thought, rightly, an insufferable little prig. But I went on thinking it too long, just because, I suppose, it had become a habit. I was like a baby being wheeled about in a perambulator years after I should have been walking. I felt the urge to use my legs, but it meant gathering one's self up to take the plunge out of the perambulator, and such a thing was not easy when every one round about was waiting and ready, at the first sign, to stuff you back again. And it is harder even for girl-babies to leave the perambulator than it is for boy-ones, because the whole

## On Religion

world seems to resent the truth that girls have legs at *all*, for walking purposes. That is, mental legs, you understand, Kindchen.

So I went on trying to take headers out of the perambulator, and being seized by the heels and put back, till sometimes, when an adventure with its after-cure of chastisement had left me more than ordinarily breathless, I would wonder if it was really better to stay where I was. But if you've got to walk, you've got to, honey, and that's all about it; and at last I found myself really out of the perambulator.

Then came the aches and pains in my poor legs, and sometimes the longing to be back again in the comfortable carriage I had left. But I found that when once you had walked you could n't go back; and when my mental feet were weary, I just went out on my material ones, and got from the stars and the night-dews and the scented earth all that my

## Letters to My Son

own and other people's tongue-wagging had lost me.

Yet there were those who condemned such communion as unchristian, and others who dismissed it as mere sensuousness; and in sheer bewilderment I wondered if everything that was natural and spontaneous in the heart of man must be plucked out and supplanted by everything that was conscious and artificial. Oh, beloved, how sick I got of it at times! I used to feel as you would if you were called in to wash your hands, and put on tight shoes for a drawing-room tea, when you might be bathing naked in a clear pool or sprawling free on a grass-covered hill. And it does n't make you good to be in a drawing-room when you don't want to be there, any more than it makes you bad to be on a hill-top when you *do*. As a matter of courtesy you wash your hands and come inside, but not as a matter of conviction.

## On Religion

Then, when you foolishly try, as I did, to make it a matter of conviction, you create out of yourself something that is neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red-herring — something that is of no use to any one, and a burden to yourself.

But once I went to a dinner-party and sat next a man who felt as I did, and he told me of a little book called 'The New Sayings of Jesus.' I bought it and found something between the leaves of it that was like a message, and it seemed to snap the last thread that held the tatters of my doubts around me.

'Jesus saith, whenever there are two they are not without God, and whenever there is one alone I say I am with him. *Raise the stone and there thou shalt find me, cleave the wood and there am I.*'

It did n't matter whether the Man who said it was divine; His right to say it was the perfection of His own life; and when you

## Letters to My Son

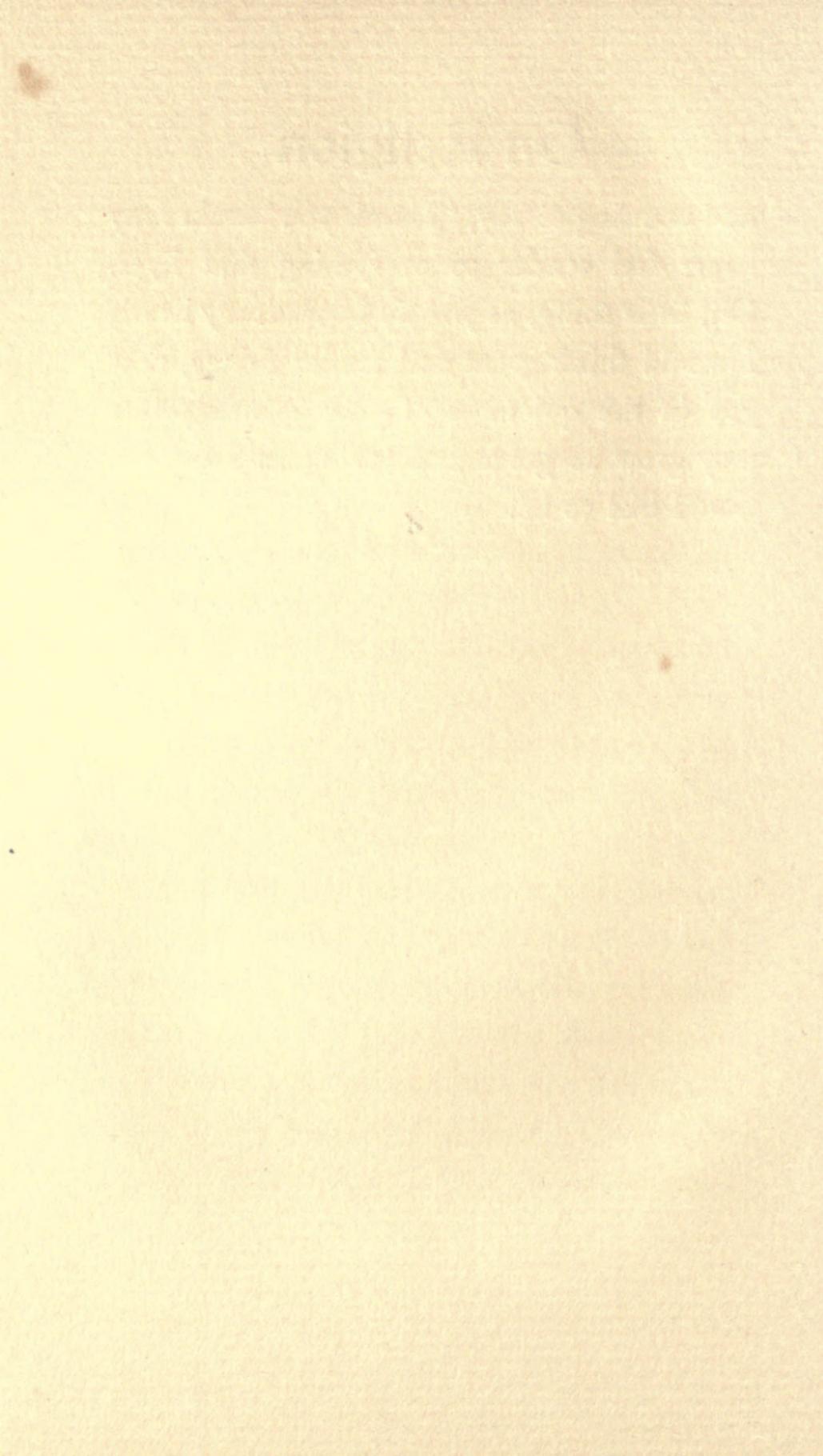
found such a one supporting what in you was an ineradicable instinct, you felt you could just let the little doxy-mongers go. If they found God in argument, they must go to argument for Him; but if you felt Him in the trees and the stones, that was the place for you to look; and the assurance of a man as great as Jesus Christ was surely assurance enough, if assurance were needed!

So if it comes to you, my son, to get your strength and your consolation and your power from the silent things of the earth, let no one make you believe it anything but right.

For myself, all that I can say is, flowers in a garden make me want to be good; and wind blowing in the tree-tops tells me I am eternal. And the sun and the flowers and the trees and the wind make me feel that I must stand bareheaded with my face to the sky, and say, 'Thank you' to something;

## On Religion

and wanting to say, 'Thank you' makes my heart feel tender to everything that lives. Oh, little thing, as you lie beneath my heart, I would think great and tender things, that you in the quietness of your growing-time may grow as great and loving as I myself would like to be.



VIII  
On Respecting  
the Body



## VIII

# On Respecting the Body

SOMETIMES, knowing what the dangers are that beset a child from the moment when his brain begins to work and his mind to observe, I have suffered very great fear for you. I have thought of you as you lay, a little unconscious nursling, in your cradle, and then, as an eager stumbling baby whose steps I followed while you staggered haltingly from chair to chair. I was there to save you, to stretch out my hand and preserve you from the sharp corners of chairs that would have bruised you if you had fallen against them. I knew where the danger lay and I saw when the insecurity threatened, and I was ready.

## Letters to My Son

And I pictured you in later years, going to school, full of the wonder of the unknown, sitting bolt upright, with shining eyes, beside your father, who was carrying you off to that new world through the gates of which you saw your manhood beckoning.

And as you drove away I watched you far down the road till the bend carried you out of sight. Just before the carriage disappeared, you stood up and waved your little cap high over your head, and I waved back, standing quite, quite still. But my heart was running, beloved, running fast and breathless and sobbing, after the wheels that were carrying the baby from me forever. I knew you had to grow into a man and I would not keep you back, but the moment of renouncement was like a thousand years of pain. You would come back to me, but the baby that used to bring his broken knees to be kissed and who crooned his drowsy little self to

## On Respecting the Body

sleep upon my neck would be gone, and I could but fill my arms with dreams of him.

And during the days that followed, when I was teaching myself not to listen for your footsteps in the house or your impetuous knock upon my door, the vision of your life at school was always with me. In my longing to protect you, my mind flew to the unsuspected dangers that might be upon you before you understood their significance or their consequence. I knew how other lives as splendid and as well-begun as yours, had been wrecked through lack of knowledge and wise guidance in their growing-time; and the fear that you might suffer so was such an anguish to me that I wanted to run to you there and then, and snatch you from the very chance of it.

But oh, honey, what a silly old mummy it was, was n't it? Fancy if I had burst into the master's study and demanded you from

## Letters to My Son

him because I was afraid you were going to know things that would n't be good for you, and I was n't sure whether you'd have the courage or the sense or the will to overcome! He *would* have been astonished and you *would* have been cross and I *should* have got into trouble!

So, as that was no use, I just sat down quietly to think it all out — to find a way. My first instinct was to keep you ignorant at any cost, but my second told me that there could be no growth or development in a life lived in a glass-case, and I knew that I would rather have you suffer a thousand times than reach the end of your life untried, unproved, and undeveloped.

But there is one thing I am going to ask of you and it is this: be content to believe implicitly what I tell you with regard to the preservation of your body, until the time comes when you can understand the truth

## On Respecting the Body

of things and choose for yourself. This will perhaps carry you up to the time of going to college and even after; but remember that, from the moment your mind intelligently asks the reason why, I want no *unquestioning* obedience. Come to me or to Oliver, and we will talk it over. There are some who may not understand. So many people seem to think that refusing to see life as it is is a mark of spirituality, and that wanting to know is merely an improper curiosity. That may be so for them, but it is not so for the surgeon, the scientist, the philosopher; and it will not be so for you, beloved, for you are going to be a man and a fine splendid man, — not a skulker behind the skirts of Inexperience.

But while I would not have you shirk anything that would go to your making, yet I would not have you hanging about on the doorstep of life waiting to dart out at every

## Letters to My Son

little sensation that flitted by. I don't think there will be much fear of that, for, what with your cricket and your footer and your lessons and your 'lines' *and* the thought of what you're going to be when you've got a mustache, you won't have a great deal of time for anything but sleep. And such a division of time is good.

But if you should be the child whose activities lie equally in the brain as in the body, whose imagination is as keen as his capacity for living, then the situation may not be so simple.

There are thoughts which come to most of us in the unconscious years of our life, floating nebulously for a while through our understanding, and disappearing in the interest of outside environment. But sometimes a chance happening will cause them to take shape and to crystallize, and the result of such thoughts, through ignorance,

## On Respecting the Body

may in later years cloud and hamper a lifetime.

Now I am not going to talk any pretty talk about ideals, because you'd immediately get a vision of long-haired poets and stained-glass saints, and you would n't listen any more. But let me put it this way. If it were said to you by some one who knew all about it: 'You jolly well can't cox if you eat jam-tart at that rate,' you would let the jam-tart go, I *think*. You would do that because you did n't want to be kept out of your race. And I would tell you that there are great things coming to you with your manhood, and that you must keep your body clean and wholesome for them. Any act or thought that is secret and carries with it fear of detection is not good; and for that reason I want you always to go *out* when your mind is perturbed or your imagination is stirring. It is not that I want to talk morality, — no man can make

## Letters to My Son

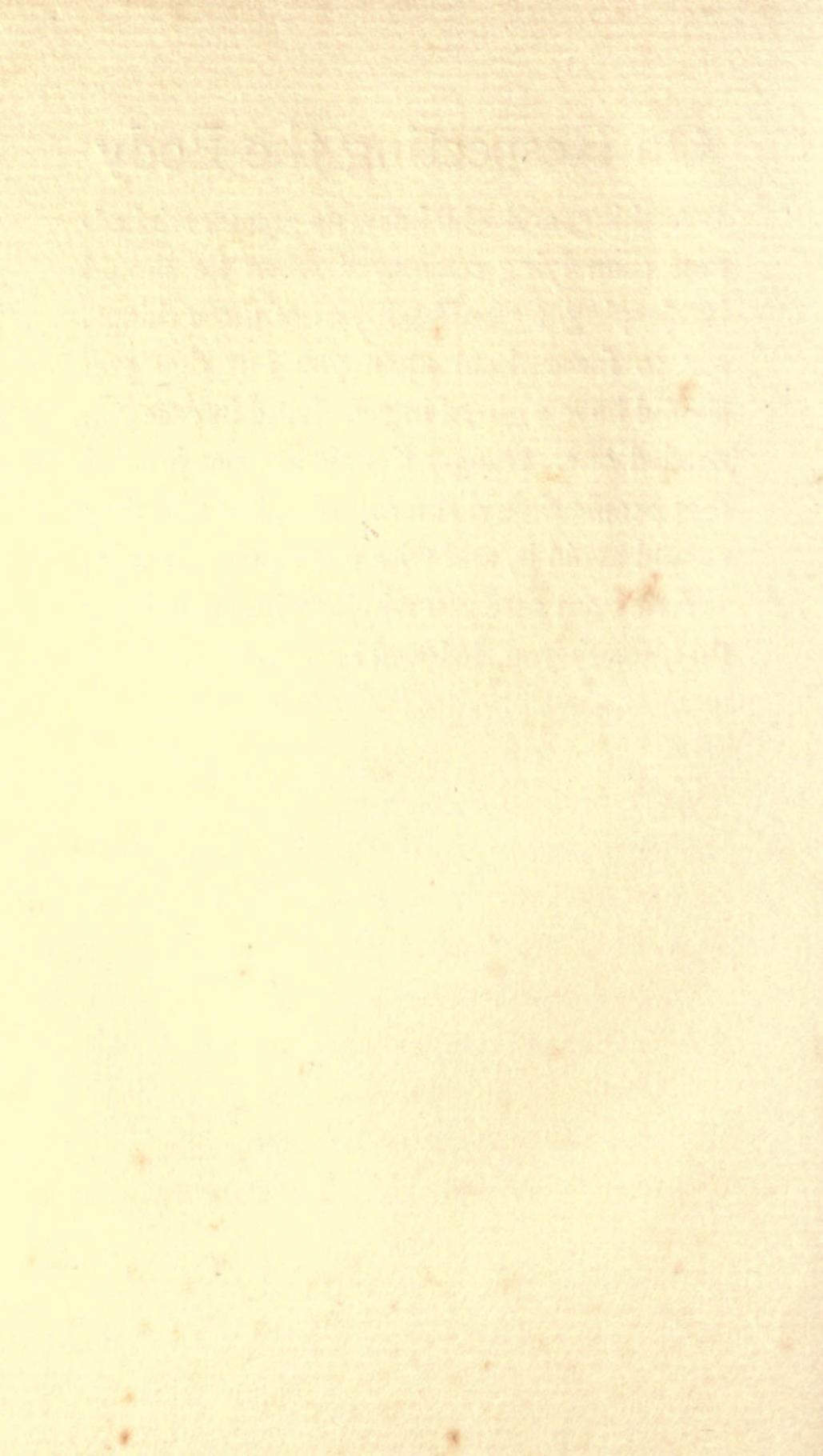
morality for another, — it is just that I want you to have your chance to be whole and perfect when you come to choose intelligently your good and evil. If, when you were too small to understand, you had grasped the candle-flame and your little fingers had blistered and grown together so that you were unable ever afterwards to spread your hand out or grasp anything properly, the moment of anticipation would not pay for the pain and the perpetual handicap that indulgence had imposed upon you. And there are acts committed just as heedlessly, and with no wilful thought of evil, which do not inflict the immediate pain of the candle-flame, but which might suddenly and in your prime disqualify you from all splendid activities in the race that is not finished till our very last breath is drawn.

I, who in my selfishness would keep you always the little baby who looked to me for

## On Respecting the Body

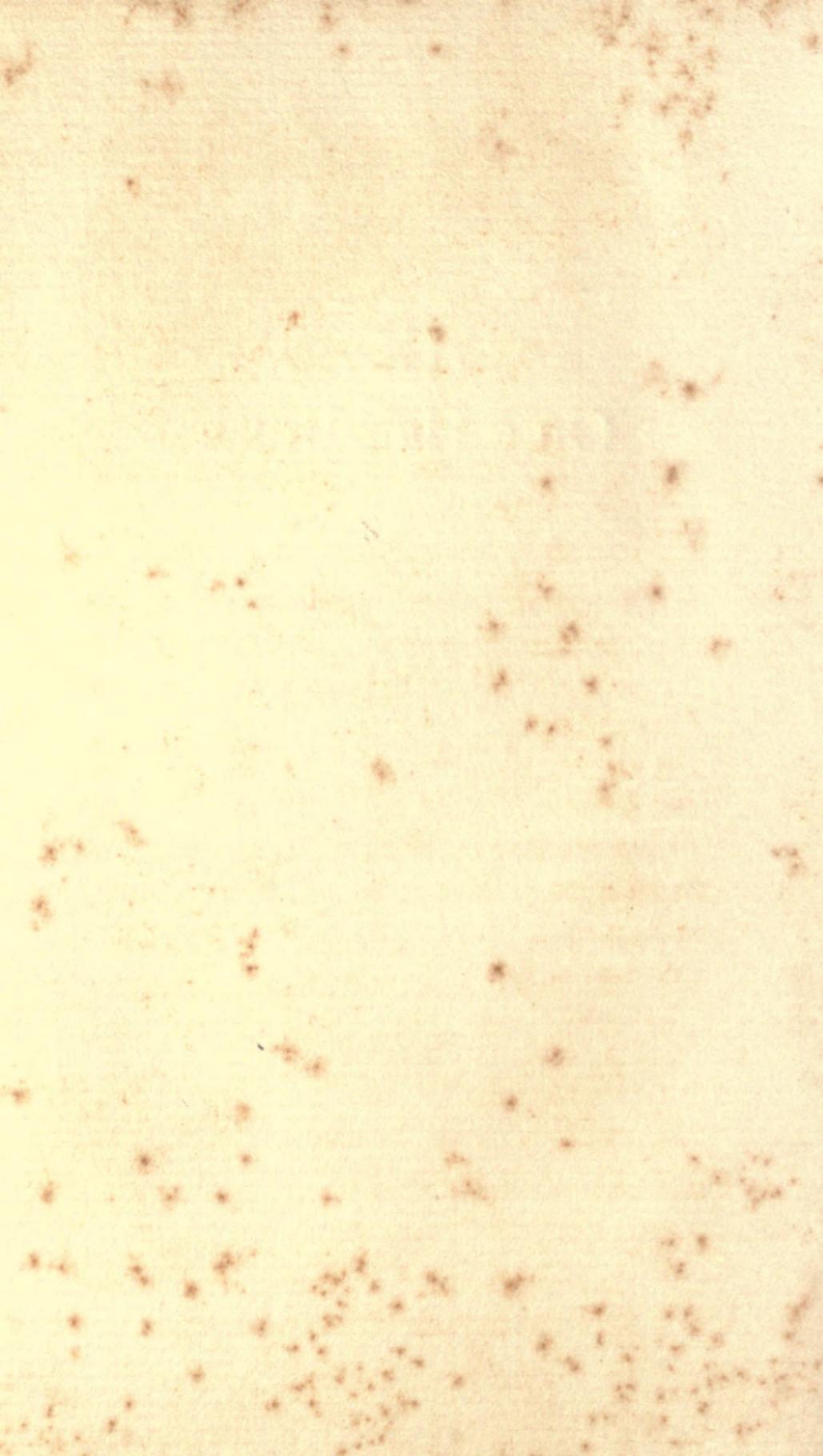
everything, and who knew no greater wickedness than lying open-eyed when he should be sleeping, I would tell you of these things, not to force them upon you but that you should have a guard in your hand in case you needed one. Danger-signals are not hoisted that people should run *into* risk, but that they should avoid it, and wise people use them so.

And I am sure you will be wise enough for that, won't you, beloved?



IX

On a Hair-Brush



## IX

# On a Hair-Brush

**T**O-DAY, when Oliver came back from town, he brought a little hair-brush for you from the ivory shop in Piccadilly.

‘There was one I hesitated about, wondering if you would like it better,’ he said, ‘a jolly little silver thing enamelled all over with roses; then I thought it was scarcely up to a man to have roses on his hair-brush, so I took this. Is it right?’

‘It’s lovely,’ I said, turning it over and brushing the back of my hand with it, ‘but you did n’t get his name put on it.’

‘What *is* his name?’ asked Oliver as if he did n’t know all the time.

## Letters to My Son

I hesitated a moment and he waited expectantly.

‘I was thinking of calling him Horace or Reginald,’ I said. ‘What do you think?’

He caught hold of my wrists. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that you don’t speak the truth and I shall have to punish you.’

‘How?’

‘I shall not be able to kiss you till you do.’  
(Just what I’ll have to say to you, honey.)

‘Horace or Reginald,’ I said looking up at him deliberately, ‘perhaps both.’

There was a pause.

‘That means you don’t *want* me to kiss you?’

I did n’t answer. He looked such a darling that I was wondering how long I could go on. It was like holding your breath.

‘I must try it another way,’ he said as if to himself.

Then he looked at me gravely.

## On a Hair-Brush

‘Margie,’ he said, ‘if you won’t speak the truth I’ll kiss you till you do.’

‘His name’s Oliver, of course,’ I said, in a terrific hurry.

Oliver looked at me. For one part of a moment he seemed as if he were going to do what I expected; then he dropped my wrists and turned away.

‘You’ve just saved yourself,’ he said blandly.

‘Oh!’

I nipped it off my tongue in time. He took his everlasting pipe out of his pocket and began wriggling a hairpin up the stem of it. I went on watching his calm unconscious back with indignation. I wish *we* had had pipes to play with at psychological moments.

‘Oliver!’

‘Margie.’

He said it politely but he did n’t turn round. I threw up the sponge.

## Letters to My Son

'Oh, I don't *want* to be saved!' I said exasperatedly.

Indeed the very nicest of you men are trying at times.

Concerning that hair-brush, beloved, it was bought for you with great love and thoughtfulness, and while I, believing in the absolute freedom of the individual, would hate to be arbitrary or dogmatic, yet I cannot refrain from suggesting that you should meet us half-way in the matter.

It is the custom of a great many babies to go through the earliest stages of their existence with their heads in a state of disconcerting nudity; and you must know, if you have any intuitive feeling at all, how disheartening such a condition is to those people who are doing all in their power to provide for your needs and to make you welcome. I feel that anyhow you will be rather a shock

## On a Hair-Brush

to Oliver, because I'm afraid that he has got it into his head you are going to be born with long curls and a blue sash; so although I won't try to bias or restrict you, beloved, I must ask you, if you are going to be bald, not to be *spitefully* bald.



X  
On Fear



# X

## On Fear

**T**HERE are times when I get horribly afraid; afraid that I may not live to hold you in my arms and watch you grow to be a man. Oh, I'm not afraid of death and what comes after! I'm only afraid of leaving you and Oliver. I want to stay with you both, to live with you and laugh with you and weep with you, to share your pleasures and your pains, to take care of you and to be taken care of by you. I know that the world would n't stop revolving if I dropped out, I know my gap would very quickly be filled by a hundred greater, better, wiser than I; but I want to stay! It comes over me so desperately some-

## Letters to My Son

times, and it is the ridiculous little nothings of life that bring it.

This morning I was looking through a basket of mending. I picked up one of Oliver's socks and drew it over my hand: there was the same little hole in the same place that is there every week in every pair. I remembered how, once, in one sock I had not found it, and how absurdly cheated I had felt. Probing right to the heart of the matter, I discovered the reason why. He had put on a pair, and then changed them for another without wearing them. I could not have rested till I got to the truth.

As I looked at the sock upon my hand I smiled, and then, being quite alone, I kissed it. It did so belong to Oliver that it was almost like his being in the room. Why should a great big man patiently go on wearing the same silly little hole in his socks week after week, month after month, year after

## On Fear

year, unless it was meant to be him as much as his hair and his teeth and his eyes were him? I kissed it again.

Then, suddenly, it came over me that in a few more months I might know nothing about either Oliver or you or the lovely ordinary things that go to make up warm, heartbreaking, human, throbbing life. Oliver would wear the holes and have them mended every week, you would cry and be comforted, go to sleep and be dressed, be dosed with dill-water and decked with ribbons, change from long to short clothes, from short clothes to jumpers, and from jumpers to knickerbockers and glory. And I—I would be somewhere outside, with never a sight or a sound of all the things that I loved; and never a touch.

In the extreme moment, I forgot you. Sometimes, when I have been hunting about for the best way of helping you to be a man,

## Letters to My Son

it has seemed as if perhaps I might be more useful as a memory than as a mother, because, as you know already, beloved, I am so full of stupidnesses and evilnesses and disappointingnesses, that you might find it difficult to take in what I said while you were watching what I did. Looking at it that way, I began to wonder whether I did n't *owe* it to you to retire.

But this morning I had no such selfless thoughts; only a great overwhelming fear, that filled the listening silences and held me still while I waited for that which was going to take me away from you and Oliver and the flowers and the sun and the dear muddy streets and the dull winter days with the fire-light to make them beautiful and tender and intimate.

Then I forgot you, and only Oliver remained. He was my man and I could not leave him. We had lived together, lain to-

## On Fear

gether, loved together, and shared together for seven splendid years, and we were part of each other. He would not let me go. If I went to him now, he would take me in his arms and hold me safe from all fear and all harm. Love would make me invulnerable: I should not die. Oliver would not let me die.

But all the time a clear relentless voice kept saying inside my head: 'Love has not held others, why should it hold you? It has not made exception for others, why should it make exception for you? There are no exceptions. When your moment comes, you go just as surely and certainly as the sun sets and the moon wanes.'

In a terror I jumped up to run to him; then suddenly I remembered something and stopped.

A while ago I had tried to talk with him about the bringing up of you in case I did

## Letters to My Son

not get through. The things I spoke of were just ordinary things, like sleeping with your window open and wearing light warm clothing. Then I went on to say that, first and foremost and last and always, I wanted you to be an honest person whatever else you were, when I looked up and saw Oliver's face.

There was such hurt in it that I stopped short. I had forgotten everything but you and your needs till then. I got up and went over to him.

'Stupid,' I said, putting my arm round his neck and rubbing my cheek against his own. 'I am not really going to die. It was only "in case."' I laughed ever such a little bit.

He pulled me down on to his knee and held me close but he did n't speak.

'It would be a very careless thing to do,' I went on, smoothing the lines out of his

## On Fear

forehead with my thumb and finger; 'a very careless thing, with two men to be looked after and one only just used to the pernicky ways of one of them! Smile at me, grumpy.'

He went on staring at me miserably.

'Margie,' he said at last, almost in a whisper, 'you won't leave me, you'll stay with me always?'

'Always and always and always,' I said, taking his face between my hands and kissing it over and over again.

So, whenever I have been afraid since, I have kept it to myself; but this morning the fear was so horrible that I would have rushed to him in the mad terror of it if I had not remembered just in time.

I dropped back into the chair and held on to the arms, trying to pull myself together, but it was no use. Something was coming steadily, slowly, inevitably, to take me away from Oliver. My mind was like a great fear-

## Letters to My Son

swept space. The Thing came with a muffled tramp, nearer, nearer, like the advance of an invisible army.

The room was very quiet. Through the open window came the whirr of a reaping-machine in a distant field; it sounded a long way off, almost as if it were in another world. A little clock on the mantelpiece was ticking the time away.

I put up my hand and caught at my throat; I was choking. Oh, to get to Oliver before this Thing took me, to be able to hear the sound of his voice, to feel the roughness of his coat-sleeve! Before I knew what I was doing, I was tearing along the corridor to the study.

It was empty. I turned and ran toward the gun-room, pushing open the door and almost falling through it.

He was there with a gun in pieces on the table, examining it.

## On Fear

As the door burst open, he looked up quickly.

'What is it?' he spoke sharply, imperatively.

I pulled myself up.

'It's nothing,' I gasped. 'I only wondered where you were.'

But I dropped my eyes because I could feel that all the horror that was in my mind was in them too. And I tried to keep my fingers off his coat but I could n't, beloved.

He did n't say a word. He went over and locked the door; then he picked me up as if I were no weight at all, and carried me to the big chair by the fireplace, and together we stayed, so, for a long beautiful time, he holding me close in his arms, I lying there still and quiet. And every now and then he would lay his cheek to mine, and I would put my hand up and touch his face; and gradually all the fear went and it seemed as if I

## Letters to My Son

could have died then, easily, for very happiness.

All the day, till now, he has not left me and only now because I have made him. I said I had something important to do and that I would never do it unless he went right away; for truly, beloved, I have felt restless when he has gone even as far as the next room. But I knew he was wanted in one of the fields, so I made a mighty effort; and he is off with Trixie at his heels, and I, little son, am telling you all about it, perhaps because I want to ease my mind and perhaps because you will have a woman of your own some day, and it will not be bad for her that you should know.

Your father has given me very much joy always, beloved.

XI

On Living Heartily



# XI

## On Living Heartily

**T**HERE lives a man not far away, who is spending a good deal of his time just now in working out a plan for the happiness of himself and mankind in general, if mankind in general is going to bend an ear to listen. Every now and then he dines with us or we with him, and on those occasions any one present has an opportunity of hearing all about it. Last night he came to us. After he had gone, Oliver walked into the drawing-room where I was sitting by myself, and shutting the door carefully behind him, stood still in the middle of the room looking at me. I looked back at him without speaking.

## Letters to My Son

‘Mason’s a good chap,’ he said at last slowly, ‘and I suppose it takes all sorts to make a world; but I’d be sorry if he had the making of mine.’

There was a shadow in his eyes almost as if Mason’s talk had troubled him.

I laughed.

‘Don’t you worry,’ I said, ‘his sort has n’t the making of any worlds, only the talking of them.’

He stood so for a moment more, then his eyes cleared and he came and put his hands on my shoulders, bending over me and gazing down into my face intently. When he spoke it was as if he were saying a creed:—

‘Thank God for you and all the trouble you’ve cost me; thank God for rain and fine, for crops that fail, for horses to ride. Thank Him for blood instead of filtered water.’

He drew a long breath and stood upright.

## On Living Heartily

‘And thank Him for Mason who has taught you to know the value of us,’ I said.

‘Thank Him for Mason,’ added Oliver, not quite so fervently; and we fell to upon the picture-puzzle that has been tying us in knots for three baffled days.

At college you will come across a heap of embryo Masons, all setting the machinery of their minds to work upon a scheme that is going to manufacture happiness and administer it in whatever quantities it may be required. You will be able to have an ounce, or a pound, or a ton, but you will be so well-regulated that you will never take more than a nibble, and so you will never have lack or fullness or indigestion or satiety: indeed, beloved, you will never have anything. It sounds jolly, does n’t it?

I know a good deal about it, for Mason is a kind person and inclined to be sorry for Oliver and me, and I think he wants to help

## Letters to My Son

us. He has told us a lot about what he and his fellow-workers are striving after, and the gist of it appears to be this.

By the steady application of his treatment, all pain will be abolished and all inconvenience done away with. If a man finds himself desiring a thing too much, or hopelessly, he will have it in his power to shut down or divert his passion by a method of reducing the blood-pressure; if he wishes a greater enjoyment of it, he has only to work upon the opposite plan, and satisfaction is his. Practically every creature — that is every modern psychologist, which is the name Mason gives himself — will be provided with a thermometer and two boxes of tabloids, one for and the other against. With the aid of the thermometer he will discover his condition and treat it with whichever tabloid meets the case. For him there will be no toilsome hills and dark valleys, no hot sun or beating rain, no

## On Living Heartily

storm or stillness. He will glide forever over the polished surface of his existence, neither hot nor cold, but in an atmosphere regulated by warm-water pipes in the winter of his emotions, and electric fans in the summer. There will be no frosts or failing seasons, no pulse throbbing with fever, no heart sick with disappointment. It will all be a beautiful, sterilized calm.

Beloved, I've nothing like that to offer you out of my experience. In the world I know there are mountains to breast and valleys to wade; but the depths of the valley give understanding and the summit of the mountains immortality. If I were to say that to Mason, he would stare for a moment, then he would laugh and say, 'Oh, well, if you are going to talk like *that* — but my philosophy does n't treat with rhetoric, it sticks to facts.'

*My* philosophy sticks to facts, *too*, beloved; and I who loved you for so long before you

## Letters to My Son

were given to me would not want to blind your eyes to truth by a fanfare of fine words when all the day and night my heart is singing with joy at the very thought of your manhood. I have walked with Mason and he sees nothing. All he knows of the meadows is that they're jolly damp in the evening and are best kept away from; and of the hill, that to climb it quickly makes your heart beat deuced fast. I have walked with your father, and together we have talked with our lips of other things, and yet not failed to see the moor-hen scurrying her little brood across the stream or the lily-bud sleeping under the willows. Are those dear and tender things less true than the truths that Mason discovers in the meadows or on the hill? and is it necessary that because we leave the meadows when the mists are sheeting them, we should lose thought and understanding of the beauties that are always there?

## On Living Heartily

Mason would drain and asphalt the fields before he would think it wise to inhabit them, and so he would treat the world of his feelings. There are people who mistake his attitude for spirituality, and use his theories in the advance of morality; but much as I long for you to be clean and splendid always, I would rather see you run the whole gamut of evil, than I would have you leave the world as undeveloped as you entered it, as unproved and untried as the Masons of the world must be, and of as little use to a troubled man in his human needs.

Son of my heart, I have, through the passionateness of me, made so many mistakes and done so many foolishnesses, that it would seem as if I might stand for one of the biggest failures that was ever made. But I have seen many great things on the way. The very pain I brought upon myself, and so passionately resented, opened my eyes to the

## Letters to My Son

pain of others, and there have been a few who have turned to me to weep. Some of the joy that a woman feels when her baby brings his broken knees to her to be mended belongs to the barren woman when a part of the world turns to her to be comforted. I have known that, and I would not change it for all the ease offered by all the philosophers since ever the world began.

Oh, my son, sometimes I feel fierce for you, and it is so when I think of such men as that. They talk of happiness. 'What do they know of happiness who only happiness know'? and what *is* happiness gained at such a loss? Would the leader, with the cry of battle ringing in his ears and the hope of victory swelling in his heart, turn from his charge to lie in idleness upon the softest bed that ever was? Or would the runner, jealous of his swiftness and desiring no reward but the proving of his own supremacy, step into

## On Living Heartily

a bath-chair and allow himself to be trundled off the course before he had breasted the tape? Does an eagle break his wing to save himself the trouble of flying? or a man part with his manhood to rid himself of the burden of his desires? Ask yourself these questions when you are training for your blue or wooing the girl of your heart, and see what use the modern psychologist is then. He will satisfy all those in whose veins trickles tepid water, but the man of blood and passions must look to his own courage and his own strength for help. He wants a lance and a helmet, not a thermometer and a medicine-chest. He will fail by his humanity, but he will succeed by his failures, and the world will be all the warmer because of him.

Such a man may you be, my beloved. Live as greatly with your heart as with your brain, that you may grow kind, and as perfectly with your body as with your spirit, that you

## Letters to My Son

may keep sane. Mortify nothing for the sheer sake of mortifying, for that is mutilation; but find out for yourself the difference between that and restraint.

And above many things, be tender and careful of all women, good or bad, beloved, for indeed they need it.

I think of you as a man, with my head held high.

**XII**  
**The Last**



## XII

### The Last

**L**ITTLE one, the time has come quite close when I shall have you for my own; so close that this is the last letter I shall be able to write. Now that it has come, I don't seem to be afraid any more. Perhaps it will take me away from you and Oliver altogether; but I have asked that if I am not to be allowed to stay, I may stay just long enough to feel your lips upon my breast and your head in the hollow of my arm. That will be, I know. For the rest, I can think of nothing but that I shall at last, after all the years of longing, see your face, and feel your little body in my arms. My heart seems to

## Letters to My Son

be a great white flame, because of the love that is in it, and my body is full of gladness because it is giving you to Oliver. Are you going to be a great little gift, beloved? Indeed, I think so. Be true, and whatever else your life is, it will be that much finer for it, because there is nothing really great that is not built on truth. Love Oliver without fear, and give him your whole confidence, for he will never abuse it. Little son, you do not know how much I want you to believe that! And if I am not there, you will love him for me too, won't you? I am afraid he will be very lonely sometimes, because we have been a great deal to each other; but if he has you it will not hurt quite so much. Oh, my darling, though I am not afraid any more, yet as I write my heart goes out in great longing to live. There are so many things I could do for you both that you cannot do for yourselves; so many ways in which I could be of

## The Last

use to you, for men, in spite of their manness, are in some ways only babies to the very end. That is one of the things that keeps us women loving you; not your greatness, but your need holds us, and as I see myself going out, I wonder anxiously who will watch for Oliver's lumbago, and do exactly what is needed without bothering him too much. He hates too much, but he would be uncomfortable with too little. And you, if they should send you out without enough warm clothes, or put you into vests that were not properly aired — indeed, indeed it would be better if I could stay.

I cannot write more. Oh, my little, little thing, God bless you always and help you to grow a man! You will never forget that I am loving you without ceasing, no matter how far away I may seem to be. Good-bye, my darling; perhaps it will only be for a little while. Good-bye.

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